Black Siren

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Docks

The docks of Ironhold never truly slept, and neither did the Rusted Anchor, a tavern known to every sailor, smuggler, and wandering trader who passed through the city. The scent of salt and spilled ale clung to the wooden beams, mingling with the occasional whiff of pipe smoke. Lanterns cast a golden glow over the rowdy crowd, where dice clattered on tables, voices rose in drunken song, and hands exchanged coins under the table to settle debts or seal contracts. Here, fortunes were made and lost in a single night, and tonight, a deal was about to be struck.

At a round table near the bar, a motley crew nursed their tankards of frothy ale. Gerr, a wiry halfling with a quick grin, leaned back in his chair, balancing it on two legs while idly spinning a pair of dice in his palm. Ulk, a gnome with thick goggles resting on his forehead, was carefully inspecting his drink as if trying to determine its exact ingredients. The orc, Gornim, massive and broad-shouldered, took slow, deliberate sips, his sharp yellow eyes scanning the room for any signs of trouble. Whisker, a ratfolk with twitching whiskers and a habit of rubbing his paws together, took cautious sips, ears flicking at every loud noise. Zili, a lizardfolk with emerald-green scales, coiled her tail around her chair leg, fingers tapping against the table in a slow rhythm. Hobbin, the dwarf, downed his ale in a single gulp, slamming his empty tankard onto the table with a satisfied grunt, while Crook, the frogfolk, absently flicked his long tongue at a fly buzzing past.

Before them sat a merchant in fine, if slightly travel-worn, clothing. He was a human named Varlan, with shrewd eyes and fingers that never strayed too far from the coin purse on his belt. He leaned in, voice barely audible over the din. “I’ve got a shipment that needs to get to Mythwyn. Fast. Various goods—spices, cloth, tools, nothing too unusual. One hundred and twenty crates. I need a crew that won’t ask too many questions and can get it there in one piece.”

Gornim crossed his arms, unimpressed. “How much?”

Varlan’s smile was as smooth as oiled parchment. “Two thousand silver upon delivery. Four hundred now, if you take the job.”

Gerr whistled. “Decent coin.” He glanced at the others. “What do you lot think?”

Zili’s tongue flicked out, tasting the air. “Nothing suspicious?”

Varlan shook his head. “Just honest cargo. A good merchant always has buyers waiting.”

Hobbin grunted. “Fine. Let’s see the goods first.”

With a nod, the deal was struck, and the crew drained their tankards before heading out. The warehouse stood a few streets away, a large structure with heavy wooden doors reinforced with iron bands. Inside, rows of crates were stacked neatly, each stamped with the merchant’s insignia. They inspected a few, prying open lids to find sacks of dried fruit, bolts of dyed silk, and rows of carefully packed metal tools. Nothing amiss.

“Looks fine,” Ulk said, adjusting his goggles.

“Then let’s get to work,” Gornim said, rolling his shoulders.

The hours passed in a blur of sweat and labor. Even Whisker and Ulk, the smallest among them, found ways to contribute, hoisting ropes and stacking lighter crates. The heavier loads were left to Gornim and Hobbin, while Crook’s long, powerful legs made him adept at scrambling up and down the gangplank with bundles of cargo. The work was tedious but familiar, and the promise of coin kept them going.

By nightfall, the last crate was secured in the hold. Varlan, true to his word, counted out four hundred silver pieces into a small leather pouch and tossed it to Gerr. “The rest when we reach Mythwyn.”

Gerr tested the weight with a practiced hand and grinned. “Pleasure doing business. We sail at dawn.”

With that, the merchant departed, leaving the crew aboard the now-loaded ship, ready for whatever the next journey might bring.

The Black Siren was a sleek, two-masted caravel built for speed and endurance, cutting through the waves like a knife. Its dark, well-oiled hull bore scars from countless voyages, yet the ship was sturdy, her timbers holding strong against the trials of the sea. She was built for both trade and adventure, capable of navigating coastal shallows and deep ocean waters alike.

The main deck was wide and well-maintained, lined with sturdy wooden railings. A raised forecastle at the front housed the ship's capstan and anchor, while the aftcastle held the ship's wheel and a small platform where Captain Whisker could oversee operations. The main mast towered in the center, with a foremast slightly shorter near the front. A complex system of ropes, pulleys, and rigging allowed the crew to adjust the large square sails for maximum efficiency. Two lateen sails on the aft mast provided additional maneuverability, letting the Black Siren handle sudden wind shifts with ease.

The rudder, controlled from the wheel at the stern, gave the ship smooth steering, essential for both dodging dangerous reefs and outpacing threats at sea. The deck also had two ballistae mounted near the bow—mostly used for defense against pirates and sea monsters.

At the very stern, below the aftcastle, lay Captain Whisker's cabin. It was modest but comfortable, with a reinforced oak desk covered in maps, navigation tools, and ink-stained logbooks. A hammock swung in the corner, next to a small shelf filled with bottles of Ironhold rum and a locked chest containing personal treasures and emergency funds. A lantern swayed from the ceiling, casting a dim glow over the room.

Further forward were the crew's quarters, a shared space lined with hammocks and wooden chests. Each crew member had a small, personal locker for belongings. The air was thick with the scent of salt and sweat, but it was home to them. A single common table sat in the middle, used for meals, games, and evening storytelling.

Beneath the main deck, the cargo hold stretched the length of the ship. Stacked neatly inside were 120 crates of merchant goods, secured with ropes and wedges to prevent shifting at sea. Barrels of salted meat, hardtack, dried fruit, and casks of fresh water were stored toward the front. At the very back, several massive barrels of ale were stacked together—Hobbin, the dwarf, made sure they were well accounted for.

Near the middle of the lower deck was the galley, a small but functional kitchen with an iron stove bolted to the floor. Smoke from the cooking fires vented through a thin chimney that led to the deck. Crates of dried fish, grain, and herbs were kept nearby, along with live chickens, goats and pigs in small wooden pens. Hobbin, the ship's cook and quartermaster, took pride in making sure no one went hungry (or thirsty).

The ships captain is Whisker the rat. The ship's cunning leader, known for his quick thinking and sharp instincts. He oversaw navigation and strategy, ensuring the Black Siren always had an advantage. First Mate & Boatswain is Gornim the orc. A gruff but experienced sailor, responsible for discipline, repairs, and keeping the crew in line. He made sure sails, rigging, and hull maintenance were handled properly. Navigator & Cartographer is Ulk the gnome. Using astrolabes, maps, and the stars, Ulk plotted courses and charted unknown waters. His keen mind kept them on track.

Helmsman & Rigging Expert is Zili the Lizard. Agile and precise, Zili controlled the ship's wheel and oversaw the complicated rigging, ensuring that every knot and sail was in its place. Cook & Quartermaster is Hobbin the dwarf. Kept the crew fed, managed food rations, and made sure no one took more ale than their fair share.

Also skilled at bartering for fresh supplies at ports. Deckhand & Lookout is Gerr the halfling. Nimble and fast, he climbed the mast with ease, keeping watch for trouble. Also had a habit of cheating at dice when not working. Deckhand & Cargo Master is Crook the Frog. Handled loading and unloading, making sure cargo was properly balanced. His powerful legs helped him hop between tasks effortlessly.

With the Black Siren loaded and the crew knowing their roles, they were ready for the journey to Mythwyn.

With the Black Siren cutting through the waves, each crew member had their specific duties, ensuring the ship operated smoothly. Every sailor knew their role and worked in harmony, their tasks finely tuned like the rigging that held the sails taut against the wind.

Standing atop the aftcastle, Whisker kept his keen eyes on the horizon, paws gripping the rail as he calculated their course. He constantly analyzed the wind, the waves, and the shifting patterns of the sky. When the breeze changed, he barked quick orders to adjust the sails. He

also kept a keen ear out for any trouble among the crew, ensuring discipline while fostering loyalty.

His most important task was navigation and strategy—he consulted with Ulk regularly, debating the best course to Mythwyn while considering trade winds, hidden reefs, and potential dangers like pirates. At night, he used a brass spyglass to scan for distant lights that could signal other ships, and during the day, he checked the color of the water for signs of shallows or shifting tides.

Gornim was always moving, his heavy boots thudding on the deck as he kept the crew in line. His primary duty was discipline and ship maintenance. He ensured the deck was scrubbed, ropes coiled properly, and that every plank and mast was in good shape. If a sail tore or a rope frayed, he set the crew to fixing it immediately.

With a loud "Lash those barrels down tighter!", he made sure nothing shifted during rough waters. He also inspected the hull daily, checking for any leaks or barnacles slowing them down. When storms threatened, he oversaw reefing the sails to prevent damage and secured anything that could be tossed by heavy waves.

Down in his small navigation room, cluttered with maps and a brass astrolabe, Ulk charted their course with precision. He took readings at dawn, noon, and dusk, using a cross-staff to measure the sun's height and calculate their latitude. His maps, covered in scribbled notes, detailed every island, current, and landmark.

He was constantly at work, comparing the waves and clouds to past records, ensuring they were on track. If Whisker needed to change direction, Ulk recalculated their estimated time of arrival and adjusted accordingly. At night, he mapped the stars, ensuring they were headed true.

Zili's long, clawed hands gripped the ship's wheel with unwavering focus. As helmsman, she controlled the ship's direction, feeling how the rudder responded to the currents. She worked in perfect coordination with Whisker and Ulk, adjusting the ship's angle with slight corrections to avoid unnecessary drag.

Her secondary role was as rigging expert. She kept a close watch on the ropes and pulleys, making sure nothing was slack or out of place. If a squall hit suddenly, she was the one scrambling up the rigging, adjusting the lateen sails to keep them from tearing. Every rope, knot, and pulley was her domain, and no one on the ship knew them better.

Below deck, Hobbin was barking orders in the galley, his thick arms stirring a pot of stew while simultaneously counting barrels of ale. As quartermaster, he tracked food supplies, making sure they had enough rations for the journey. He enforced strict rules about portions, ensuring nobody overindulged. The ale was rationed at 4 litres per day for each member.

His secondary role was bartering at ports. When they docked, he took charge of negotiating for fresh supplies, using his no-nonsense attitude to haggle better deals on grain, dried fish, and hardtack. He also mended the water barrels, ensuring they remained airtight and free of rot.

Light as a feather, Gerr scaled the mast with ease, his keen eyes scanning the sea. His role was simple but vital: lookout. With a spyglass in hand, he kept watch for distant ships, incoming storms, or hidden dangers. A sharp whistle from above could mean a change in course or a call to arms.

When not in the crow's nest, Gerr helped maintain the deck, coiling ropes and securing crates. He was also the first to grab a spear if trouble arose, though he preferred to settle matters with dice rather than daggers.

Crook's job was all about balance. He oversaw the cargo hold, ensuring the weight was evenly distributed to keep the ship from listing to one side. If the load shifted unexpectedly, Crook was the one rebalancing crates to prevent an accident.

With powerful legs, he could hop across the deck effortlessly, moving supplies twice as fast as others. During unloading and loading, he ensured that everything was accounted for and no cargo was missing. If a merchant tried to cheat them, Crook knew the weight of every crate by heart and could spot a missing box instantly.

Each member of the Black Siren's crew had a role that kept the ship functioning smoothly. From Whisker's leadership to Zili's control of the sails, Ulk's calculations, and Gornim's discipline, every job was essential. Whether in calm seas or stormy waters, they worked as a single unit, knowing that one mistake could mean the difference between safe passage and disaster.

As the Black Siren pressed on toward Mythwyn, the crew settled into their routines, their hands calloused, their minds sharp, and their spirits high. They were sailors, adventurers, and survivors—a true brotherhood of the sea.

As the Black Siren sailed steadily through the open waters, the night air was crisp, and the rhythmic creaking of the wooden hull mixed with the distant splash of waves against the ship's side. The crew had settled into their evening routines—some finishing their meals, others securing ropes and checking the sails for the night. The lanterns flickered below deck, casting long shadows over the cargo hold, where crates and barrels sat stacked neatly, secured by thick ropes.

Then, a sound broke the peace.

A sudden, violent rattling came from deep within the cargo hold. A single crate trembled on its own, rocking back and forth as if something inside was trying to escape. A loud thud echoed through the chamber, followed by the unmistakable sound of wood splintering.

CRACK.

The crate burst apart, sending shards of wood flying across the hold. Something shifted in the dim light—something unnatural.

A mass of shifting flesh and gnashing teeth lunged from the wreckage of the crate. What had once appeared to be an ordinary shipping crate was, in reality, a mimic, its wooden exterior

peeling away to reveal a hungry, many-toothed mouth. The creature let out a wet, guttural growl, its form twisting as it sprouted sticky tendrils that lashed out toward anything nearby.

From within the shattered crate, a black iron mask tumbled onto the floor, glowing with an eerie purple light. The moment it hit the deck, an invisible force rippled outward, sending a chilling breeze through the hold. The air grew thick with unnatural energy as ropes slithered like snakes, barrels began to shake violently, and nearby crates lurched forward as if possessed. The ship itself seemed to groan in protest as the artifact's dark magic spread like wildfire, animating everything around it.

The noise had already drawn attention. Gornim was the first to react, grabbing his axe and stomping toward the hold. His voice boomed across the deck:

"What in the nine hells is going on down there?!"

From the upper deck, Zili turned her head sharply, her keen senses picking up the unfamiliar movement below. She let go of the wheel just long enough to shout:

"Something's loose in the hold!"

Whisker, who had been scanning the horizon, twitched his whiskers and immediately leaped down the stairs, drawing a curved dagger from his belt. Gerr, already halfway through a mug of ale, set it down with a groan.

"Why can't we just have one calm night?" he muttered before sprinting after the others.

Hobbin and Crook, who had been near the food storage, quickly realized that the living cargo posed a dire threat to their supplies.

"If those things get into the food stores, we're in trouble!" Hobbin growled, already reaching for a burning lantern.

Crook, eyes wide, tensed his powerful legs, ready to leap onto a higher surface if necessary.

Ulk, who had been in his navigation chamber, peered out with a mix of curiosity and concern. He adjusted his goggles and muttered, "Why do these things always happen at night?"

The Black Siren had faced storms, pirates, and treacherous waters before—but this? This was something else entirely. The crew had to act fast, or their journey to Mythwyn might end before they even reached the next dawn.

The cargo hold of the *Black Siren* was in chaos. The mimic, its false wooden exterior peeling away like shed skin, loomed in the dim lantern light. Its glistening, slimy flesh pulsed as jagged teeth snapped hungrily at the crew. From its grotesque form, it lurched forward, its sticky tendrils reaching out to grasp anything nearby.

And at its feet, resting among the shattered remains of the crate, lay the true horror.

A black iron mask, slick with mucus and glowing with unnatural purple light, pulsed with malevolent energy. The moment it hit the floor, a wave of force rippled outward, sending a chill through the air. The cursed artifact vomited forth by the mimic had its own wicked power—it animated nearby objects, making the ship itself turn against its crew.

Gornim was the first to strike. His axe came down in a brutal swing, aiming to cleave straight through the mimic's pulsating flesh. But the creature moved with terrifying speed, its body warping and shifting. A tendril lashed out, catching Gornim's wrist, its adhesive slime locking onto his arm like a vice.

"Gah! Damn thing's got me!" the orc bellowed, his boots skidding on the wooden floor as the mimic began pulling him closer to its gaping maw.

Zili was already moving. The lizardfolk dropped from the stairs above, daggers flashing in the lantern light. She slashed at the mimic's tendrils, severing one with a wet, squelching snap. The creature shrieked, its flesh bubbling where the dagger struck, but another limb grew in its place, thick and dripping with saliva.

"It regenerates!" Zili hissed, backflipping away as another tendril whipped toward her face.

Meanwhile, Gerr had scurried up into the rigging near the ceiling beams of the hold, taking advantage of the height. "Oi! Ugly!" the halfling shouted before hurling a dagger directly at the mimic's eye-like formation on its hide. The blade sank deep, and the mimic let out a choked, gargling shriek, momentarily releasing Gornim.

"Nice shot, but keep them coming!" Whisker barked, drawing his curved saber. His sharp ratfolk eyes flicked toward the artifact as it pulsed again—and suddenly, the crates around them lurched to life.

The black iron mask trembled on the floor, and then, with a flash of dark energy, the rope coils near the walls unraveled on their own—and lunged toward Hobbin and Crook like writhing snakes.

"The bloody ship is attacking us now?!" Hobbin bellowed, reaching for his hammer just as one of the ropes coiled around his ankle and yanked his legs out from under him.

Crook, ever quick on his feet, leaped high, dodging a rope that whipped through the air where his head had been moments before. He landed near the cursed mask, staring at its twisting, flickering aura.

"We gotta do something about this thing!" Crook croaked, narrowly avoiding a floating knife that swung toward him like a dagger in an invisible assassin's hand.

Ulk, who had stayed near the stairs, was furiously flipping through his notes—the gnome had studied dozens of magical artifacts in his time, and there was always a weakness.

"The mask—it's a conduit! It's channeling the mimic's magic and animating the objects! If we destroy it, the other things should stop moving!" Ulk shouted over the chaos.

Whisker's eyes narrowed.

“Then we break the damn thing.”

Whisker darted forward, saber gleaming in the flickering lantern light. He ducked under a flying plank, twisted past a crate that tried to slam into him, and lunged at the mask. But before he could reach it, the mimic roared, its body shifting and stretching, forming into something even larger, its flesh fusing with the very ship itself.

The mimic was trying to become part of the *Black Siren*.

“We end this NOW!” Gornim roared, lifting his axe.

Zili, Gerr, and Crook all struck in unison. Zili’s dagger slashed across the mimic’s forming tendrils, severing its attempt to merge with the ship. Gerr hurled another dagger, piercing the beast’s gaping maw. Crook, with one final powerful leap, brought a heavy crate crashing down onto the mask, cracking it in two.

With a piercing shriek, the mimic convulsed violently, its body losing shape, its tendrils retracting. The cursed mask cracked further, and a burst of dark energy erupted from within, sending out a shockwave that knocked the crew off their feet.

The animated objects fell lifelessly to the floor. The floating knives clattered. The crates stilled. The ropes unraveled.

And in the center of the carnage, the mimic collapsed, its form deflating, until nothing remained but a rotting, gelatinous husk.

The ship fell silent.

Panting, Whisker brushed dust from his coat and glared at the cursed remains of the artifact.

“Well. That was an interesting bit of cargo.”

Hobbin grumbled, rubbing his bruised leg. “We’re never taking a merchant job without checking every single crate again.”

Gerr smirked. “I dunno, I like surprises. Keeps things exciting.”

Zili flicked mimic goo off her dagger, narrowing her reptilian eyes. “Next time, the surprise can stay locked in the crate.”

Whisker sighed, sheathing his saber. “Everyone, clean this mess up. We set sail again at dawn. I want nothing left of that thing on my ship.”

The crew, battered but victorious, set to work, clearing away the last remnants of their unexpected battle.

The *Black Siren* sailed on, carrying them toward Mythwyn—but now, with a new lesson learned: Never trust a crate that shakes on its own.

The Black Siren had been sailing for a week, cutting steadily across the deep blue expanse of the sea. The sun had shone bright for days, the wind had been kind, and the crew—flush with coin from their last job—had spent most of their time drinking, gambling, and telling exaggerated stories of past adventures.

With each passing day, the ship's barrels of beer ran a little lighter. Every crew member was allowed four liters per day, and they made good use of it—sloshing tankards, belching loudly, and swaying even before the ship hit rough waters.

But as the seventh evening fell, the air changed.

The wind howled low like the growl of a hungry beast. The sky turned from a soft twilight to an angry swirl of gray and black clouds, twisting like writhing serpents across the horizon. The first raindrops struck the deck like needles, cold and sharp, and then— the storm hit in full force.

The first wave struck the ship like a giant's fist, tilting the *Black Siren* violently to port. Crew members stumbled, some falling to their knees, others sprawling against crates.

"By the gods, she's rolling hard!" Gornim bellowed, grabbing onto the nearest mast to steady himself.

Nine-meter waves towered over the ship like walls of liquid fury, crashing down in thunderous explosions of white foam. Lanterns swung wildly, their flickering light casting eerie shadows across the rain-slicked deck. The squeals of terrified animals rose from below deck—pigs shrieked, chickens flapped madly in their cages, and the goats bashed their heads against the walls, desperate to escape.

Crates that had once been securely tied broke loose, tumbling across the deck like drunken sailors. One smashed into the railing, splitting open, sending dried goods spilling into the stormy abyss.

Zili, soaked to the bone, fought against the spinning wheel, her claws digging into the wood as she struggled to keep the ship's bow pointed into the waves. Every gust threatened to wrench the wheel from her grasp, and for a terrifying moment, a particularly strong gust did —sending the ship into a dangerous tilt.

"Someone tie me down if you have to, but I'm keeping this damn ship straight!" she snarled, teeth bared against the wind.

Meanwhile, Hobbin had taken control of the rations and beer barrels, making sure nothing spilled overboard. But he could barely stand straight himself, and after a particularly hard roll of the ship, he toppled backward into a pile of sacks, cursing the storm and all its ancestors.

Ulk, ever the thinker, had lashed himself to a support beam below deck, muttering calculations in a drunken slur. "At this rate… the ship has, uh, a *42.7%* chance of capsizing… give or take."

Gerr, meanwhile, was faring the worst. The halfling had been drinking all day, and his stomach finally revolted. He staggered to the railing, clutching his belly as he heaved everything he'd consumed in the last two days into the stormy sea.

"Uuughh, I swear… I'll never drink again…" he moaned—only to grab another tankard an hour later.

Whisker, despite his smaller frame, held his ground near the stern, barking orders. "Tie everything down! Secure those damn crates before we lose all our cargo!" His fur was soaked and plastered to his face, his whiskers twitching against the rain. Despite the chaos, his sharp eyes never stopped moving.

Another massive wave slammed into the side of the ship, sending two crew members sprawling. Crook, normally nimble, lost his footing and slipped across the deck, only stopping when he collided face-first into the main mast.

"Blasted storm!" he croaked, rubbing his head, dazed.

Gornim had been securing loose ropes, but a sudden shift sent him careening forward, his head slamming into a wooden beam. He collapsed for a moment, dazed, before shaking it off with a growl.

Meanwhile, the animals continued to panic below deck. A wooden pen holding one of the goats snapped apart, and the animal rushed blindly up the stairs, braying in sheer terror before slipping on the rain-slicked deck and sliding right into Gerr—who let out an undignified yelp as he was knocked flat on his back.

The storm raged on, hour after hour, relentless.

No one could sleep. The ship lurched violently every few minutes, forcing even the most exhausted crew members to remain alert. The wind screamed like a vengeful spirit, and the waves threatened to swallow the ship whole.

Some crew members, pushed to their limits, just kept drinking—not out of celebration, but as the only way to numb the terror and exhaustion.

As dawn finally began to break, the storm started to ease, but not before leaving its mark. The *Black Siren* was battered, the crew bruised, sick, and exhausted.

But they had survived.

Barely.

The Black Siren sailed smoothly over the now-calm sea, the storm of days past nothing more than a bitter memory. The sun hung golden in the sky, casting its warm glow over the deep blue waters, and the salty breeze was pleasant rather than punishing. The crew, though still sore and bruised, had resumed their usual duties. Whisker paced the deck, hands behind his back, occasionally sniffing the air as he kept watch for trouble.

Zili held the wheel lightly, barely needing to adjust their course as the wind worked in their favor. Ulk sat in the shade near the navigation table, checking and rechecking his charts. Gornim and Gerr checked the rigging, tightening knots and replacing frayed ropes. Crook balanced precariously on a barrel as he rearranged some cargo in the hold. Hobbin, as always, was busy checking their food supply and rationing out portions, barking complaints about how much ale was being consumed.

The ship was at peace, and by evening, the crew was ready to feast.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, the crew gathered around the main deck, where a large wooden table had been set with plates of fish stew, biscuits, and thick slices of cheese. Ale sloshed in tin cups, and laughter echoed through the open air.

Gornim raised his mug, taking a deep swig. “To the Siren! And to not being thrown overboard this week!”

"Aye!" the crew shouted in unison, clinking their cups together.

As the food disappeared and the dice began to roll, conversation drifted to the past, as it often did on quiet nights.

“Whats your story, anyway?” Gerr asked, tossing his dice onto the table. “We’ve been sailing together for a while, but I swear, we know more about what ale each of us prefers than our own damn past.”

Zili flicked her tail, shrugging. “Not much to tell,” she said. “Was raised in the marshes. My tribe valued hunting and survival. But when you live around the same swamp for twenty years, you get restless. So I left.” She took a sip of ale. “Figured the sea would have more to offer than a bunch of croaking lizard elders telling me not to eat strangers.”

Whisker chuckled. “Smart move. But I can’t imagine a tribe like that would’ve been happy with your choice.”

Zili smirked. “Oh, they were furious. Told me I’d be dead in a month. Guess I proved them wrong.”

Crook stretched his legs out, grinning. “Heh. I get it. I left my swamp too. We had this whole ‘great frog king’ nonsense back home. Boring as hell. I figured the ocean had more adventure.”

Hobbin, busy chewing a piece of stale bread, huffed. “Bah. Swamps and seas. Nothin’ but water. I grew up in a mountain hall, where folk know how to drink and fight properly. Learned to cook, learned to mine, then got bored. Turns out, you can only eat so many damn mushrooms and cave fish before you crave somethin’ more interesting.”

Ulk nodded, adjusting his goggles. “I was an engineer’s apprentice in a dwarven city once. Thought I’d be happy making gears and cogs all my life. But then, one day, I watched a skyship take off, and that was it. The world was too big to stay put. So I packed my tools and found the first ship that’d take me.”

Gerr laughed. “Ha! So you were a bookworm before you were a sailor?”

Ulk smirked. “And yet I still win more dice games than you.”

Gornim leaned back in his chair, arms crossed. “I come from a long line of warriors,” he said, his deep voice carrying over the group. “My people don’t sail, don’t travel much beyond their warbands. I was supposed to be a war chief.”

Whisker raised an eyebrow. “And yet, here you are, drinking ale with a bunch of sea rats.”

Gornim grinned. “Turns out, I like the sea more than I liked fighting over scraps of land. Besides…” He took a long swig of ale. “Warriors don’t get four liters of beer a day.”

The group laughed, dice clattered, and the night carried on in a haze of friendly competition.

While the crew was distracted, Hobbin quietly slipped away from the table, muttering something about checking the food stores. But in reality, he had his sights set on something special.

Deep in the storage room, beneath a pile of salted fish, he had hidden a single sausage and a plump red tomato—ingredients far better than the usual ship rations. He grinned as he sliced the sausage, savoring the smell before taking a greedy bite.

“Worth every risk,” he mumbled, chewing happily.

Meanwhile, Gornim had his own plan. As the dice game became more heated, he casually reached over, swiping another mug of ale from the supply. He tilted it back before anyone could notice, sighing in satisfaction.

“Aye, now this is living.”

The *Black Siren* rocked gently on the calm sea, the crew laughing, drinking, and rolling dice beneath a sky full of stars. For now, all was well.

The Black Siren anchored just off the coast of a small, uncharted island, a place where sailors often stopped to resupply on fresh water and forage for extra provisions. The land was dense with lush green jungle, the air thick with the scent of damp earth and blooming flowers, and somewhere in the distance, the calls of unseen creatures echoed through the trees.

A small rowboat bobbed on the gentle waves as Whisker, Gornim, and Hobbin rowed toward the shore, two empty barrels wedged between them. Each carried their weapons, not willing to take any risks. Though this place was often used by travelers, the wild was unpredictable, and they were always ready for trouble.

“Alright,” Whisker said, leaping onto the sand and pulling the boat further inland. “We fill these barrels, maybe grab some fruit if we can find any, and get back to the ship before nightfall.”

Gornim stretched his shoulders, rolling his neck until it cracked. “Fine by me. Let’s just make it quick. I don’t like land much.”

Hobbin grunted as he lifted one of the barrels. “You don’t like anything that doesn’t have beer in it.”

Gornim smirked. “Damn right.”

The trio moved inland, following a faint animal path through the underbrush. The jungle was thick with vines, and every step sent small lizards and insects skittering away. After a while, they paused to rest, sitting on a fallen log to discuss their next move.

“So, which way?” Whisker asked, pulling a small knife from his belt and flicking it idly between his fingers.

Hobbin scratched his beard, glancing around. “If I were a spring, I’d be where the ground dips. Water always pools in low places.”

Gornim leaned against a tree. “Or we could follow the sound of frogs. They always stick close to water.”

Whisker twitched his whiskers. “Fine. We move downhill and listen for croaking. If either of you lead us in circles, I’m making you carry the barrels back *full*.”

After a few hours of searching, the crew finally stumbled upon a crystal-clear spring, bubbling gently from a rock formation. The water was pure, untouched by filth, and perfect for refilling their barrels.

Just as Hobbin hammered the barrel’s lid into place, a sharp rustling in the trees made them all freeze.

Whisker’s ears twitched. “We’re not alone.”

A shrill cry rang out, and from the underbrush, six goblins burst forth—small, wiry, and armed with rusted swords and jagged spears.

“Kill ‘em! Take their shinies!” one screeched.

Gornim was the first to react. A goblin lunged at him with a crude spear, but the orc sidestepped and grabbed the shaft, wrenching it out of the goblin’s hands before driving his fist into its face, sending the creature sprawling backward.

Whisker whipped his curved saber free, ducking low as another goblin swung at him. With a quick slash, he cut deep into its side, and the goblin let out a wet gurgle before collapsing.

Hobbin, though slower, was just as deadly. A goblin leapt at him, but the dwarf caught it mid-air, lifted it, and slammed it onto the ground with a sickening crunch. He then swung his hammer, caving in the skull of another attacker.

“Two down!” Hobbin barked.

The goblins shrieked but fought on.

One managed to slice a shallow cut across Gornim's arm, but the orc roared in fury and swung his axe in a wide arc, cleaving through the goblin's shoulder.

Another goblin threw a dagger at Whisker, but the ratfolk dodged just in time, the blade grazing his ear. With a growl, he leapt onto the goblin, pinning it down and driving his dagger into its throat.

The last goblin, seeing its allies dead or dying, let out a panicked squeal and turned to flee.

"Oh no, you don't." Gornim picked up a fallen spear and with a powerful throw, sent it straight through the goblin's back, pinning it to a tree.

Silence fell over the jungle.

Whisker wiped his blade clean, breathing heavily. "Well, that was fun."

Hobbin spat on the ground, inspecting his knuckles. "Little bastards didn't stand a chance."

Gornim chuckled, rolling his shoulder. "One of 'em actually cut me. Almost impressed."

Whisker crouched next to one of the goblins, rummaging through its pouch. He pulled out a handful of coins, some teeth, and a half-eaten rat.

"Lovely." He tossed the pouch away.

Hobbin stretched his arms. "Alright, let's find some fruit and get the hell outta here."

After leaving the spring, the trio made their way toward the edges of the jungle, searching for fruit trees. They found a small grove of trees bearing ripe, yellow fruits that looked like a cross between a pear and a peach.

Hobbin climbed onto Gornim's shoulders, grumbling as he reached for the best-looking ones. "If I fall, I'm landing on you."

Gornim smirked. "Then I'll step aside."

Whisker, quicker and more agile, climbed a nearby tree and shook the branches, sending a rain of fruit down onto the ground.

"There, that's enough." Whisker dusted his hands. "Let's get back before something else decides to jump us."

With barrels full of fresh water and a sack full of fruit, the crew rowed back to the ship, their work done, their thirst quenched, and their coin purses a little heavier from whatever loot they had stripped from the goblins.

As they climbed aboard, the rest of the crew greeted them.

Zili smirked, arms crossed. "What took you so long?"

Gornim dropped the bag of fruit at her feet. “Had to kill some goblins.”

Ulk raised an eyebrow. “Goblins? Over fresh water?”

Hobbin huffed. “And you wonder why I prefer beer.”

The crew laughed, and as night fell over the sea, the *Black Siren* set sail once more, their supplies replenished, their blades bloodied, and their spirits high.

The Black Siren sailed steadily into the open sea, its sails full and the winds favorable. The sun glowed bright during the day, and at night, the stars shone clear over the dark waters. The week had been calm, almost too calm—no storms, no enemy ships, just the endless rhythm of the ocean against the hull.

But sailors tell stories.

They whisper of a cursed stretch of ocean where haunting melodies drift over the waves, luring sailors into the abyss. A place where ships vanish without a trace, where men walk into the sea with smiles on their faces and never return.

And whether they believed in such tales or not, the Black Siren was about to sail straight into its grasp.

On the seventh night, as the crew gathered for their evening meal, a strange sound floated over the deck.

A song.

Soft. Ethereal. Carried by the wind like a lover’s whisper, threading through the masts and ropes, curling around the ears of the unsuspecting crew.

Zili’s tail flicked uneasily. “Do you hear that?”

Gornim scowled, staring out at the horizon. “Aye. And I don’t like it.”

The others paused, listening.

It was beautiful. More than beautiful. It was perfect—each note tugged at something deep inside, an ache, a longing, an invitation.

For a moment, Whisker’s grip loosened on his mug, his sharp ratfolk ears twitching as if straining to catch more.

Then the sound vanished, as if it had never been.

A collective shudder passed through the crew.

“I don’t like it,” Hobbin muttered, rubbing his beard. “That ain’t a song made by mortal voices.”

Gerr, pale, gulped down his ale. “Let’s hope it’s just the wind.”

But it wasn’t.

By the next morning, one of the crew was gone.

Davrick, a human deckhand, had simply vanished during the night. His hammock was empty, his boots still neatly tucked beneath it. No sign of struggle, no blood—just an absence, like he had walked off the face of the world.

Whisker’s tail lashed in agitation. “Did anyone hear anything?”

The crew shook their heads. None had seen him leave, none had heard a sound.

Hobbin frowned. “Man doesn’t just disappear. Either he jumped, or something took him.”

Gornim’s jaw clenched. “Ain’t no sign he jumped. No splash, no alarm. We should check the ship.”

And so they searched.

They checked below deck, the cargo hold, even the crow’s nest. But there was no trace of Davrick.

That night, the singing returned.

This time, it was louder.

It drifted through the ship, sweet and sorrowful, a song that spoke of things lost, of love unfinished, of peace beyond the waves.

And when the crew woke the next morning, another was missing.

Now, there was no doubt—something was calling them.

Whisker called the crew together. “No more waiting. We find whatever’s doing this and end it before we all end up in the deep.”

Ulk adjusted his goggles. “It’s magic. It has to be. If it’s a siren’s spell, we need something to block out the sound.”

Hobbin rummaged through their supplies and handed out wads of beeswax to stuff in their ears. It wasn’t much, but it might help.

“We stay in pairs,” Gornim ordered. “No one wanders alone.”

The crew searched the ship, lanterns flickering in the dim light.

And then, Crook stopped short.

His eyes widened as he pointed toward the stern of the ship, where the water shimmered with an unnatural glow.

Figures moved beneath the surface.

The first one breached the water like a specter, her pale skin luminous in the moonlight, her hair floating around her like tendrils of seaweed. Her eyes were fathomless pools of silver, her lips parting as the song rose again, more intoxicating than before.

And then, the others emerged.

Six of them.

Their bodies were inhuman, their long, webbed fingers curling over the ship's railing. Their lower halves disappeared beneath the waves, but glimpses of scaled tails flicked beneath the water, betraying their true forms.

One of them reached toward Gerr, her voice like honeyed silk. "Come with us… rest, be at peace…"

Gerr's eyes went glassy.

Before he could move, Whisker drew his sword and swung it.

The hit shattered the spell. The siren shrieked, black blood spraying into the sea as she reeled backward.

Then, all hell broke loose.

Zili drew her sword, slashing at the nearest siren as she lunged onto the deck. Gornim's axe cleaved through the air, driving another back before she could sink her claws into his shoulder.

One of the sirens let out a piercing wail, and several crew members fell to their knees, clutching their heads.

Hobbin, teeth bared, grabbed a bucket of lantern oil and hurled it into the water, followed by a lit torch.

The sea erupted in flames.

The sirens screeched, their forms twisting in the firelight as they retreated into the deep.

But not before one snatched a struggling crew member and dragged him below.

The waters stilled. The song faded.

And then, there was only the sound of the waves lapping against the hull.

The crew gathered their wounded, their faces ashen.

Whisker wiped the seawater from his blade. “No more whispers. We get the hell out of this cursed stretch before they come back.”

As the *Black Siren* sailed away from the haunted waters, the crew remained silent, shaken but alive.

The ocean was vast and merciless, but tonight, they had fought against the call of the deep… and won.

The *Black Siren* drifted motionless on the glasslike sea, its sails slack, its crew restless. The sun hung heavy and merciless in the sky, beating down upon the deck, making the wooden planks hot underfoot. The air was still, thick, and humid, with not the faintest whisper of wind to stir the ship forward. The water, usually alive with ripples and rolling waves, lay perfectly flat, stretching out to the horizon like a vast, endless mirror.

Days had passed like this, waiting, watching, hoping for even the smallest breeze to return.

There was little to do but wait, and waiting on a ship full of hardened sailors meant drinking, gambling, and telling stories.

Beneath a makeshift canopy strung between the masts for shade, Whisker, Gornim, Gerr, Ulk, and Hobbin gathered around a wooden barrel that served as a gaming table. A set of bone dice clattered across the rough wood, followed by a round of groans and cheers. Half-drunk mugs of beer rested precariously on nearby crates, and a pile of silver coins, brass trinkets, and even a dried sea biscuit made up the night’s winnings.

Gornim grinned, sharp teeth flashing. “Alright, lads, ante up. You all know the rules. Five dice each, best rolls win. Ones are curses, sixes are blessings, and if you get three of the same, that’s ‘Fortune’s Favor’ and you take the pot.”

Hobbin rolled first, tossing his dice onto the barrel. The numbers landed—a one, two threes, a four, and a six.

Ulk snorted. “One curse, one blessing. You break even.”

Hobbin grumbled, taking a long swig of beer before nodding to the next player.

Whisker’s turn. He tossed his dice lazily, and the numbers showed three twos, a five, and a six.

Gerr groaned. “Of course. Fortune’s Favor. Again.”

Whisker grinned, tail flicking smugly. “I don’t cheat, I just win.” He scooped up the small pile of silver from the center.

Gornim rolled next, getting a pair of fives, two fours, and a single one.

Ulk chuckled. “You’re cursed, my friend.”

Gornim huffed. “Bah. Not cursed. Just unlucky.” He took another deep gulp of beer, wiping the sweat from his brow.

The game continued, the dice clattering, the crew laughing, cursing, and shouting over bad rolls and stolen victories.

After a few rounds of dice, Ulk pulled out a deck of weathered playing cards, shuffling them with surprising speed and dexterity for someone who spent most of his time navigating maps and instruments.

“Alright, let’s play *Siren’s Folly*,” he announced. “It’s simple—highest pair wins, but if you pull the Siren’s Queen, you have to drink an entire mug of beer before your next turn.”

Gerr laughed. “Now that’s my kind of game.”

The cards were dealt, and the game began.

Hobbin took his turn first, drawing a pair of sevens. “Not bad,” he muttered, sipping his drink.

Gornim drew a lowly pair of twos, and grumbled into his beer.

Ulk himself pulled an eight and a jack—nothing special.

Then Whisker flipped his card, revealing the dreaded Siren’s Queen.

The table erupted into laughter.

Gornim slapped the table. “Drink up, Captain.”

Whisker sighed, smirking, and grabbed his mug. He tilted it back, draining the entire thing in one go.

Gerr cheered. “That’s a true sailor.”

Hobbin snorted. “Or a fool.”

As the games carried on, the crew settled into casual conversation, filling the silence that hung heavy over the motionless ship.

Ulk leaned back. “Y’know, I once heard of a ship that got stuck in dead waters for a full month. No wind, no rain. The crew went mad.”

Gornim raised an eyebrow. “And?”

Ulk shrugged. “They say the last survivor got picked up by a merchant ship… talking to a pile of bones like it was his best friend.”

Gerr smirked. “Hobbin talks to his food all the time. We should start worrying?”

Hobbin grunted. “If the wind doesn’t pick up soon, we *should* start worrying—about our water supply.”

The thought cast a brief silence over the group. They had enough rations for another two weeks, but without wind, there was no telling how long they'd be stuck here.

The Black Siren remained still, caught in the unrelenting grip of the windless sea. The sails hung loose, lifeless, and the ocean stretched endlessly in all directions, a vast, unmoving mirror beneath the relentless sun.

Though the ship was going nowhere, the crew could not sit idle—a ship was always in need of care, even in dead waters.

At a small table near the navigation chamber, Ulk hunched over a map, a piece of charcoal between his fingers as he sketched new notations along the parchment. His goggles sat perched on his forehead, smudged with sweat and ink as he examined star charts spread before him.

He mumbled to himself, running his fingers over the measured distances, cross-referencing their last known location with the position of the stars the previous night.

Finally, with a sigh, he picked up the ship’s logbook, flipping through pages of past voyages and notes made by Whisker.

“Date: Still unknown. Position: Indeterminate. Progress: None. We remain stranded on a dead sea, with no wind to fill our sails and only patience to move us forward. Rations remain stable, morale holds, though the dice and beer keep the crew distracted. If we remain here too long, our supplies will dwindle before we reach the next trade port. Options for action: None, save to wait. I will check the stars again tonight and hope for signs of movement.”

He tapped the end of his quill against the book, then sighed and closed it, wiping the sweat from his brow.

“Damn wind. Even the stars feel useless,” he muttered.

Meanwhile, below deck, Crook was sorting through a mess of fallen crates, carefully placing their spilled contents back where they belonged. The storm from days ago had dislodged some of the stacks, and without the usual rocking of the ship to shift them back in place, they remained scattered in awkward positions.

He lifted a heavy wooden box, hopping lightly to shift it against the bulkhead, securing it with rope to keep it from sliding again.

Opening one of the crates, he flicked his tongue out, inspecting its contents—dried fish, grains, and salt-packed meat. Nothing spoiled, nothing missing.

“Still good,” he muttered, dusting off his hands.

He stopped for a moment, listening to the deep silence around him, save for the occasional creak of the wooden beams. It was eerie. A ship should move, should breathe with the waves. But right now?

It felt like the sea itself was holding its breath.

Shaking the thought, he returned to stacking the last few crates.

Up on deck, Gornim sat cross-legged beneath the shade of the mainsail, a large roll of canvas stretched before him. He was patching a tear in the sail, carefully threading a thick needle through the fabric.

The storm had left its mark, and while it wasn't bad enough to hinder sailing, he refused to leave it weakened for when the wind finally returned.

"No use having full sails if they're torn to shreds," he grunted to himself, tugging the thread tight.

After an hour of steady work, he tied off the final knot and tested the strength of his repair, giving a firm pull on the canvas. Satisfied, he moved on to reinforcing the rigging, tightening and replacing any frayed ropes that had seen too much salt and wear.

He wiped sweat from his brow, pausing to glance up at the motionless sails.

"Any time now, wind," he muttered. "We're waiting."

Elsewhere, the remaining crew was hard at work scrubbing down the deck. With the sun glaring down, the planks dried quickly, leaving behind a crust of salt and grime.

Armed with buckets of seawater and stiff brushes, they scraped away the buildup, ensuring the deck remained clean and strong.

Whisker, overseeing the effort, barked orders.

"Get the corners too! No half-done work on my ship!"

He inspected the planks near the hull, tapping them with the butt of his cutlass, checking for soft spots that could indicate rot or weakness.

A few places needed re-oiling, so some of the crew rubbed sealant onto the wood, preserving it against the harsh sun and salt air.

When the work was done, the crew gathered for their meal. It was simple but filling—salted fish, biscuits softened with ale, and slices of dried fruit from their last stop.

As always, drinks were poured, though Whisker kept an eye on rations, ensuring no one overindulged too much.

Gerr tossed a piece of biscuit in his mouth and leaned back. "If we don't get wind soon, we might have to row the whole damn way to shore."

Hobbin snorted. “Not me. That’s deckhand work.”

Zili smirked. “Good. You can keep cooking, and we won’t let you starve when we run out of rations.”

Ulk sighed. “It’s strange. This part of the sea should have wind. We’re not in the Doldrums, but it feels like it.”

Gornim leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. “Could be worse. Could be another storm.”

Whisker tapped his claws on his mug. “We’ll move when we move. Until then, we keep busy.”

The mood lightened as the crew swapped stories, jokes, and the occasional complaint about the sun.

As the night set in, those off-duty took to their personal gear. Boots were resoled, ensuring they wouldn’t slip when the deck eventually got wet again. Torn shirts and breeches were patched, though some of the crew were far less skilled with a needle than others. Weapons were sharpened and polished, their edges honed in case the next delay brought something worse than stillness.

Though the night was quiet, a feeling of unease lingered.

The sea was never truly silent.

And as the *Black Siren* drifted motionless, the crew waited for the wind’s return

A Visit

After days of smooth sailing, the Black Siren’s crew gathered around the navigation table below deck. Ulk’s map was spread out, marked with a small coastal village just ahead.

Whisker’s claws tapped on the parchment. “It’s a small fishing town. Isolated. No fortress, no walls. That means no real defense.”

Gornim crossed his arms. “We go in fast, strike hard. Take what we need—supplies, labor. Kill anyone who fights back.”

Hobbin smirked. “And take whatever food they got. I’m sick of dry biscuits.”

The plan was simple. They would anchor offshore, unseen in the night. Two longboats would row silently to land. They would strike when the village was deep in sleep, grabbing workers for the ship, looting food and supplies, and burning enough houses to send a message.

The two boats slid onto the shore, the crew stepping onto the wet sand in silence. Above them, the small village slept, no watchmen in sight. A few oil lanterns flickered in windows, but most homes were dark and silent.

Whisker raised a paw and signaled. The crew split into two groups. Gornim, Gerr, and Crook would storm the largest house, dragging people out. Whisker, Zili, Hobbin, and Ulk would loot food stores and seize livestock.

With weapons drawn, they crept forward.

The first door was kicked in by Gornim's boot. A half-dressed man jolted awake, but before he could scream, Gerr had a blade at his throat.

"Make a sound, and you're dead," the halfling hissed.

Other doors were thrown open. Women and men were dragged from their beds, shackled at the wrists. Children screamed, but were shoved aside—too small to be useful. Fishermen, blacksmiths, and strong farmhands were beaten down and chained together.

Hobbin and Zili stormed the village's grain store, shoving sacks of wheat into crates.

"Hurry it up!" Whisker growled. "We don't have all night."

A door slammed open, and six villagers emerged with crude weapons—pitchforks, fishing spears, and old swords.

An old but strong man stepped forward, gripping an axe. "You filth won't take us without a fight!"

Gornim grinned, rolling his shoulders. "That's the spirit."

The village erupted into chaos. A fisherman lunged at Crook, but the frogfolk leaped over him, landed behind, and stabbed his back. Gornim cleaved through two men, his axe breaking ribs and spilling blood onto the dirt. Zili met a villager's sword with her own, twisting and slicing across his gut, sending him collapsing with a gurgled scream. One villager swung at Hobbin, but the dwarf caught the man's wrist and smashed his hammer into his face—teeth shattered, blood sprayed, and the man dropped. Whisker cut down a desperate woman who tried to stab him with a carving knife. She fell into the dirt, clutching her slashed throat.

Within minutes, the villagers lay beaten and bloodied, groaning in agony.

The survivors were kicked forward, shackled, and thrown into a line.

Ulk set the first flame, tossing a burning torch onto a thatched roof. The fire spread fast, licking at the sky, reflecting in the terrified eyes of the remaining villagers.

Gerr smirked. "Hope the next town sees this glow."

With their prisoners bound, their crates of grain and stolen chickens loaded, the crew rowed back to the ship, the flames roaring behind them.

The Black Siren had its new workers.

And the village was no more.

The longboats cut through the dark waters, silent save for the creak of oars and the quiet sobs of the captured villagers. Shackled together, their wrists bound in rusted iron, they huddled in the boats, faces pale under the moonlight.

As the Black Siren loomed ahead, her black sails hanging slack in the night breeze, Whisker stood at the prow, watching the ship grow closer. His tail flicked in satisfaction.

"Get 'em up," he ordered as they reached the hull.

Gornim and Crook hauled the prisoners onto the deck, forcing them to their knees. The crew looked on, some amused, some indifferent, as the new labor force was divided. Whisker cracked a whip on their backs.

“No free rides on my ship,” Whisker growled. “You work, or you swim.”

A few resisted, hesitated—a mistake.

A crack echoed through the night as Whisker’s whip lashed across a man’s back, sending him sprawling.

"No dawdling!" barked Gornim, shoving another forward.

The captives were assigned their fates. The strongest were sent to the lower decks, forced into menial tasks like scrubbing floors, repairing planks, and hauling supplies. The older and weaker went to the kitchen, working under Hobbin, peeling vegetables and cleaning pots until their hands bled. One woman, young and unscarred by labor, was selected to serve the crew, bringing ale and food, kept under watchful eyes.

With the prisoners put to work, the *Black Siren* set sail once more, gliding through the dark waters toward Mythwyn.

After several days of smooth sailing, the horizon changed.

Gone was the endless sea—in its place stood a city like no other.

Mythwyn, the City of Scholars and Sorcery, rose from the mist, its spire-crowned skyline shimmering in the early light. Unlike the lawless ports of the south, this was a place of knowledge, magic, and intrigue.

The city was divided into several distinct parts. The Arcane Spire District – The heart of Mythwyn, where great towers of marble and silver reached toward the heavens. Here, wizards, alchemists, and enchanters studied ancient tomes and powerful artifacts. Strange lights flickered in the air, and the air was thick with the smell of parchment and burning incense. The Mercantile Quarter – The city’s beating heart of trade. Market stalls lined the streets, selling spell components, enchanted jewelry, and relics from forgotten civilizations. Merchants from across the world bargained in half a dozen tongues, while robed scholars

haggled over rare scrolls and alchemical brews. The Dock Ward – A world of its own. While most of Mythwyn was a city of learning, the Dock Ward belonged to thieves, mercenaries, and smugglers. Here, shadowy figures peddled contraband, guilds of rogue mages whispered in back alleys, and pirates and slavers made their trades behind closed doors.

The Celestial Gardens – A strange, dreamlike place where floating islands of stone hovered in the air, cradling beautiful gardens filled with plants from across the planes. It was a place for contemplation, meditation, and quiet study, though it was said that those who wandered too deep sometimes never returned. The Old Quarter – Where the oldest buildings stood, carved from obsidian and jade, their walls inscribed with forgotten runes. Legends spoke of hidden vaults beneath the city, where secrets best left buried still lingered.

As the Black Siren glided into the harbor, towering statues of robed figures loomed over the entrance, each holding a glowing orb in their hands, their expressions cold and knowing.

The docks were alive with movement—workers unloading crates of reagents, scribes jotting down inventories, and students of magic gathering supplies for their studies. But beyond the organized chaos of the scholars, there were those who operated in the shadows.

And that’s where the crew was headed.

The Whining Mermaid was a place of secrecy and quiet deals, nestled in the narrow alleys between the Dock Ward and the Mercantile Quarter. Unlike the rowdy, lawless taverns of pirate ports, this one catered to men of means and mercenaries with purpose.

The scent of roasted meat, old wood, and spiced wine filled the dimly lit room.

The crew of the Black Siren stepped inside, their boots clicking on polished floors, drawing the attention of a few robed figures and cutthroats nursing their drinks.

They settled into a private corner booth, where the light was low, and ordered ale and steak—their first real meal in weeks.

Gornim tore into his meat with satisfaction. "Finally. Something that isn’t hardtack and dried fish."

Hobbin nodded, chewing thoughtfully. "Aye. Now, let’s see if Rogar makes good on his end of the deal."

As they ate, the door creaked open, and a figure stepped inside—

Rogar.

A burly man with sharp eyes, wrapped in fine but travel-worn robes, his belt lined with golden rings, and a dagger tucked into his sash.

He scanned the room, then strode toward the crew’s table, seating himself across from Whisker.

"I trust your voyage was successful," Rogar said smoothly, his voice like oiled silk.

Whisker leaned forward, his tail flicking lazily. "That depends. You still paying good coin for our cargo?"

The morning air in Mythwyn's Dock Ward was thick with the scent of brine, damp wood, and magic-infused incense burning from the nearby marketplace. The Black Siren bobbed gently on the waves, her hull freshly scraped, her black sails furled as the crew and their captor labor force prepared for the day's work.

Rogar stood on the dock, his fine robes drawn close against the morning chill, his calculating eyes scanning the ship before he stepped aboard. His hands moved with practiced ease, inspecting the seals on the crates, prying one open with a small, delicate knife to examine the contents inside. Rolls of cloth, sacks of dried fruit and grain, bundled tools—all untouched, undamaged.

Whisker crossed his arms and smirked, his whiskers twitching. "Satisfied?"

Rogar closed the crate and nodded, his expression cool. "A clean delivery. I expected no less." He turned to the shackled men and women, their backs bent under the weight of their chains. "Put them to work. I want everything in my warehouse by sundown."

Gornim barked an order, and the slaves were set to unloading, their bare feet scraping against the rough wood of the deck as they hoisted heavy crates onto their shoulders. Some grunted under the strain, others stumbled, but none dared resist. The lash of a whip or the butt of a boot kept them moving.

For hours, the work continued, sweat dripping down brows, muscles straining under the weight. Hobbin, overseeing the food crates, made sure not a single sack was dropped. Zili moved between the workers, ensuring that no one slowed the pace. Gerr perched on a railing, sharpening a dagger as he watched the captives struggle with an amused smirk.

By nightfall, the last crate was secured inside Rogar's candlelit warehouse, the iron doors swinging shut with a metallic clang. The merchant turned, withdrew a heavy pouch of silver, and placed it into Whisker's waiting hand. "Sixteen hundred, as promised."

Whisker weighed the pouch in his claws and nodded. "Pleasure doin' business."

The crew departed, slipping into the warm, smoke-filled interior of the Whining Mermaid, where mugs of ale and thick slabs of roasted meat awaited them. The tension of the past weeks loosened as they drank deep, played cards, and watched the inn's crowd with predatory eyes. They weren't just here to celebrate. They had twelve slaves left, and they needed a buyer.

It wasn't long before opportunity came knocking.

The door creaked open, and a woman draped in a dark hooded cloak stepped inside, moving with the measured confidence of someone accustomed to the shadows. Her piercing green eyes scanned the room, and Whisker wasted no time. He slid from his chair, tail flicking, and approached her, voice low and knowing.

“I’ve got some meat for sale. Fresh. Strong. The kind that don’t tire easy. If you’ve got the coin, we can make a deal.”

The woman tilted her head slightly, regarding him with an unreadable smirk. “I might know someone who’d be interested. Stay put.”

She vanished into the night, and the crew waited, drinking, laughing, playing dice, until hours later, she returned. But she wasn’t alone.

Six men followed her, hard-eyed brutes clad in mismatched armor, their hands resting too comfortably on the hilts of their weapons. They moved with the certainty of men who believed they had already won.

The leader, a scarred man with a shaved head and a grin full of yellowed teeth, stepped forward. “Hand ‘em over.”

Whisker’s ears flicked, and his tail curled slightly. “You forgot the part where you pay.”

The bald man chuckled, a deep, phlegmy sound. “Nah. We’ll just take ‘em. Be grateful we ain’t throwin’ you in chains too.”

For a moment, there was silence. Then Whisker smiled. A sharp, knowing grin.

“Go fuck yourself.”

The room exploded into violence.

The bald man lunged, blade flashing, but Whisker was faster. He ducked under the slash, twisted to the side, and drove his curved saber deep into the man’s gut, twisting the blade before ripping it free in a spray of crimson. The brute staggered backward, clutching his spilling intestines, and collapsed onto the table, smashing mugs of ale to the floor.

Gornim met the next attacker head-on, catching a descending axe with his own, their blades locking for a heartbeat before the orc threw his weight forward, sending the man stumbling into a chair. With a single mighty swing, Gornim’s axe split the bastard’s collarbone, a deep, wet crunch as the man slumped sideways, choking on his own blood.

Zili moved with lethal precision, sidestepping a thrust and slashing across an exposed throat, the wound opening like a second mouth. Blood sprayed across the wooden floor, and the dying man gurgled, sinking to his knees, clutching at the wound as though he could force it shut.

A second attacker lunged at her with a short sword, but she coiled low, tail whipping around his legs, sending him sprawling. She was on him in an instant, blade driving down through his ribs, her emerald scales glistening with fresh gore.

A third man tried to make a run for it, but Crook leaped across the table, landing on him with a crushing impact. The frogfolk drove a dagger into the base of his skull, twisting until the body stopped twitching.

Hobbin, ever practical, grabbed a chair and smashed it into an oncoming assailant's face, sending teeth flying. The poor bastard barely had time to react before Hobbin's hammer came down, crushing his skull like an overripe melon.

The last man, realizing his mistake, turned to flee—but Gerr was faster. The halfling hurled a dagger, and the blade sank between the man's ribs. He staggered, gasping, and Gerr simply walked up behind him, grabbed his hair, and opened his throat with a second knife.

The tavern had gone silent, save for the dying gasps of the fools who thought they could take from the Black Siren's crew.

Whisker licked the blood from his claws and turned to the woman who had brought them. She watched the carnage without emotion, then simply shrugged.

"Guess you handled that."

Whisker smirked. "Guess we did."

With no need for further words, the bodies were dragged out, stripped of valuables, and unceremoniously tossed into the black waters of the harbor.

The crew returned to their table, wiping blood from their faces, and signaled for more ale.

It had been a good night.

The Whining Mermaid Inn was alive with laughter, slurred singing, and the heavy scent of ale and roasted meats. The crew of the Black Siren had made themselves at home—tankards overflowing, dice clattering, and silver coins exchanging hands as the night wore on.

Whisker leaned back in his chair, his tail flicking lazily, watching Gornim down another mug like it was water. Gerr was already a little too drunk, slurring his curses as he lost yet another round of dice to Ulk. Zili sipped slowly, ever watchful despite the relaxed atmosphere, while Hobbin had somehow acquired an entire roasted ham and was gnawing away like a starving wolf.

Then, the door creaked open, and a burly man stepped inside.

He was a mountain of a man, clad in rich but practical clothing, his grizzled beard well-kept, a heavy coin pouch hanging from his belt. His eyes swept the room, taking in the drunken sailors and lingering just long enough on the crew's table before making his way toward them.

"Room for one more?" he asked, his voice deep and steady.

Whisker grinned, his whiskers twitching. “As long as you’ve got coin, friend.”

The man smirked and pulled up a chair, rolling his shoulders before slamming a pouch of silver onto the table. “Three hundred silver. I win, I double it. I lose, well... I suppose I drink more.”

Gornim chuckled, already rattling the dice in his palm. “Big bet. Hope you know how to roll, stranger.”

The first round was tense, but the crew had played this game a thousand times over. The burly man lost the first throw, then the second, his grin faltering. By the third round, it was clear—his luck had run dry.

With a final roll, Zili took the pot, scooping up the pouch of silver with a pleased flick of her tail.

The man laughed, shaking his head as he took a deep swig of his drink. “Hells, you lot play like devils. I suppose that’s what I get for trusting sailors with dice.”

Whisker leaned forward, resting his arms on the table. “You gambled big—means you’ve got coin to burn. Maybe you’re in the market for something more... useful than empty pockets?”

The man stroked his beard, his gaze sharpening. “That depends. What exactly are you selling?”

Whisker's eyes gleamed in the dim light. "Meat."

A slow smile spread across the man's face. "Ah. The kind that works for its keep?"

Gornim smirked. "Exactly."

The conversation shifted, the man listening intently as the crew described their merchandise —strong backs, healthy bodies, obedient enough once broken in. He nodded thoughtfully, stroking his beard as he mulled it over.

"I could use a few," he admitted. "The estate needs fresh hands. Housework. Gardening. Some servants. I'll take nine. Three hundred gold."

Hobbin let out a low whistle. "That's a deal."

Whisker extended a paw. "You've got yourself a purchase."

They shook hands, sealing the transaction, and the group left the tavern, making their way to the Black Siren.

The burly man strode onto the deck of the *Black Siren*, his boots heavy against the wood. The twelve slaves were lined up, their wrists still shackled, their faces weary.

He stepped forward, examining them like cattle—checking their arms, their backs, their posture. He muttered to himself, nodding in approval.

Then, without warning, he cracked a whip across one of their backs. The sharp sound echoed in the night air, and the man winced, biting back a cry of pain.

"How you like your new master, eh?" the man said with a grin.

The crew chuckled, watching as the nine chosen slaves were loaded onto a separate cart, ready for transport. The man paid in full, three hundred gold gleaming in the lantern light.

With their pockets full, the crew was invited to the man's estate, a sprawling manor nestled in the hills outside Mythwyn. The stone halls were lined with tapestries, and the dining hall was large enough to fit an entire ship's crew.

The new servants moved quickly, still in chains, but now dressed in plain tunics, bringing jugs of ale and platters of roasted meats to the long table.

The man—who introduced himself as Boren Wraithhall, a merchant-lord of Mythwyn—lifted his mug. "To good business."

The crew clanked their mugs together, already deep into their drinks.

Gornim ripped into a turkey leg, grinning as he wiped grease from his chin. "This is how a man should eat."

Hobbin eyed a serving platter of sausages, nodding in approval. “Now this is better than ship rations.”

Ulk, half-drunk, tapped his fingers on the table. “So, Boren, what else do you trade in? Or is it just house labor?”

Boren smirked. “I deal in many things. Spices. Alchemical reagents. Occasionally rare artifacts.”

Whisker leaned forward, ears twitching. “Artifacts, you say?”

Boren shrugged, chewing thoughtfully. “Mythwyn’s full of them. Half the city is buried in ancient secrets. Some of them are best left alone.”

Zili raised an eyebrow. “And yet, you don’t seem like the type to leave things alone.”

Boren laughed, taking another deep drink. “You’re not wrong. Sometimes, if the price is right, I get my hands dirty.”

Gerr rolled a pair of dice absentmindedly, eyeing the merchant-lord. “And what’s the dirtiest job you’ve done?”

Boren smiled over the rim of his mug. “That, my friend, is a story for another night.”

The fire crackled in the great hearth, the crew feasting well, their coin purses heavier than ever. But in the shadows of Mythwyn, deals were always being made, and new opportunities always lurked just out of sight.

And this would not be the last time they crossed paths with Boren Wraithhall.

The great dining hall of Boren Wraithhall’s estate was filled with the sound of laughter, clinking mugs, and the occasional drunken boast. The crew of the *Black Siren* had eaten their fill, their bellies warm with meat and ale. The new servants moved about silently, refilling drinks, keeping their heads down, knowing better than to interrupt their new master and his guests.

Boren sat at the head of the table, his thick fingers idly spinning a golden ring around his knuckle. His sharp, calculating eyes scanned the crew, lingering on Whisker, who was leaning back in his chair, tail flicking lazily.

“Tell me,” Boren finally said, swirling his mug. “How far are you lot willing to go for gold?”

The table went silent for a moment before Gornim let out a chuckle. “Gold is gold. And we’re not in the habit of asking too many questions.”

Boren smiled. “Good. Because I have a job for you—a dangerous one. But the kind that will make you very, very rich.”

Zili rested her elbows on the table. “We’re listening.”

Boren leaned forward, voice lowering. “There’s a vault beneath Mythwyn. A vault that most don’t even know exists. It holds relics of ancient power—things wizards would kill to get their hands on. I have a contact who is willing to pay handsomely for one such item.”

Ulk raised an eyebrow. “You’re asking us to rob a wizard vault?”

Boren smirked. “Not just any vault. This one is buried beneath the Old Quarter—below the ruins of the first arcane academy ever built in this city.”

A tense silence fell over the room. The Old Quarter was notoriously dangerous, its streets filled with forgotten magic, cursed relics, and creatures that lurked in the abandoned halls of ruined buildings.

Whisker drummed his fingers on the table. “And what exactly are we stealing?”

Boren’s voice dropped even lower. “A book.”

Hobbin snorted. “We’re risking our necks for a book?”

Boren’s smirk never wavered. “Not just any book. *The Codex of Ithzara.*”

A few of the crew shifted uncomfortably at the name. Even Ulk, usually skeptical of arcane nonsense, stiffened.

“That’s an old name,” Ulk muttered. “Ithzara was one of the first archmages of Mythwyn. They say she went mad studying the nature of planar magic.”

Boren nodded. “And before she vanished, she left behind her greatest work—her final book of spells, secrets, and knowledge. Wizards have sought it for centuries, but none have returned from the vault beneath the ruins.”

Gerr smirked. “Then why send us?”

Boren’s grin widened. “Because you’re not scholars. You’re not cautious old men afraid of what lurks in the dark. You’re opportunists. Survivors. You know how to take risks and get out alive.”

Whisker’s tail flicked. “And what’s in it for us?”

Boren leaned back, tossing a small pouch onto the table. It spilled open, revealing a handful of gleaming emeralds.

“Five thousand gold upon delivery of the Codex.”

The crew exchanged glances. That was more than an entire year’s worth of raids. Enough to refit the ship, buy new weapons, drink themselves stupid for months.

Zili grinned. “I like it.”

Gornim cracked his knuckles. “We’ve raided ships, burned villages, fought off sea monsters. What’s one more job?”

Hobbin picked up one of the emeralds, biting it lightly before grunting in approval. “Five thousand is five thousand. I’m in.”

Boren raised his mug. “Then we have an accord.”

The crew lifted their drinks, sealing the deal.

The next morning, the crew returned to the *Black Siren* to prepare for the job. Ulk spent hours studying maps of the Old Quarter, marking possible entry points into the ruins. Zili sharpened her weapons, ensuring her blades were ready for whatever horrors lay beneath. Gornim reinforced the ropes and harnesses, knowing they might have to descend deep underground. Whisker sent Gerr and Crook to the markets, gathering supplies, torches, and climbing gear.

By nightfall, they were ready.

Beneath the ruined streets of Mythwyn, something ancient and forgotten waited in the dark.

And the crew of the *Black Siren* was about to wake it up.

The Old Quarter of Mythwyn was a place most sane folk avoided. By day, it was a maze of crumbling stone buildings, weathered statues, and overgrown streets where dust and arcane residue clung to every surface. By night, it was something else entirely—a place where the whispers of the past never truly faded, and shadows moved even when no one was watching.

The crew of the Black Siren stood before the ruins of Mythwyn’s first arcane academy, cloaked in darkness. What was once a grand hall of learning was now a husk of cracked marble, shattered spires, and half-buried stairways leading to forgotten depths.

Ulk knelt beside an old stone marker, brushing off the dust and moss, revealing ancient runes carved deep into the surface. He muttered to himself, eyes scanning the writing.

“This is it.” He stood, adjusting his goggles. “The entrance should be just ahead.”

Whisker’s tail flicked. “Then let’s move before we draw attention.”

The crew climbed over fallen pillars and shattered archways, their boots crunching on loose gravel as they descended a wide set of stairs leading underground. The further they went, the colder the air became, the walls shifting from crumbling stone to something older, untouched by time.

At the bottom, a massive iron door stood before them, covered in glowing blue sigils that pulsed faintly in the dark.

Zili narrowed her eyes. “That’s magic.”

Hobbin huffed. “No shit. How do we get through?”

Ulk reached into his satchel, pulling out a vial of shimmering silver dust. “Anti-warding powder. Expensive, but effective.” He sprinkled it over the runes, and the symbols flickered, dimmed, and finally faded into nothing.

The door let out a deep groan, the metal screeching as it slowly swung open. A rush of stale air spilled out, carrying with it the scent of old parchment, wax, and something rotten.

Beyond the threshold, a vast chamber stretched into darkness, lined with tall bookshelves, broken statues, and shattered desks. And at the far end, resting on a stone pedestal, was the Codex of Ithzara.

A massive leather-bound tome, its cover marked with strange, shifting symbols, as if the letters themselves were alive.

Gornim cracked his knuckles. “Too easy.”

The moment he spoke, the ground trembled.

A low, grinding sound echoed through the vault, followed by a sudden clatter of bones. From the shadows of the bookshelves, skeletal figures emerged, their empty sockets glowing with ghostly blue fire. Some were dressed in tattered mage robes, their bony hands crackling with arcane energy, while others still clutched rusted swords and spears.

And behind them, something far worse stirred—a massive construct, built of metal, bone, and arcane runes, its head a featureless mask, its arms ending in razor-edged claws.

A deep, hollow voice rumbled through the chamber.

“THE KNOWLEDGE OF ITHZARA IS NOT FOR THIEVES.”

The air crackled with magic as the undead charged forward, weapons raised, spells forming at their fingertips.

Whisker drew his blade. “We don’t leave without that book.”

The crew of the Black Siren raced into battle.

The vault erupted into chaos.

The undead guardians surged forward—skeletal warriors in tattered mage robes, their bony fingers crackling with arcane energy, while others still held rusted swords and spears, their hollow eyes burning with unnatural light. The massive construct, a fusion of ancient metal and bone, lurched toward the crew, its clawed arms glowing with runes as it prepared to strike.

Whisker’s saber flashed as he dove to the side, avoiding a lightning bolt that blasted a crater in the stone floor.

“No holding back—kill ‘em fast!” he barked.

Zili was already moving. She ducked under a skeleton's blade, twisting her cutlass and slicing through its spine in one clean motion. The bones clattered to the floor, but another took its place, lunging with a rusted spear.

Gornim met the attack head-on, his massive axe shattering ribs and skulls as he tore through two at once. A skeletal mage raised its bony hands, but before it could complete its spell, Gerr hurled a dagger, the blade embedding deep into the undead sorcerer's forehead. The glowing eyes dimmed, and the skeleton collapsed into a heap of robes and dust.

"That's one down," Gerr muttered, flipping another dagger between his fingers.

Meanwhile, Ulk scrambled toward the Codex, his mind racing. The book sat on the pedestal, surrounded by floating runes, and he knew better than to simply grab it.

"It's warded!" he shouted over the din of battle. "I need time to break the spell!"

Crook dodged a sweeping claw from the construct, then vaulted onto a bookshelf, kicking off to land beside Ulk.

"How much time?" the frogfolk croaked.

"Two minutes."

"You have one." Crook drew his sword, turning to defend him.

The construct moved, its massive arm swinging down, ready to crush them both—

But Hobbin was already charging, roaring as he swung his hammer straight into the creature's knee joint. The metal cracked, and the guardian staggered, its glowing eyes flickering.

Zili saw the opening. She leapt onto its back, her daggers flashing, stabbing deep into the exposed runes along its spine. The construct let out a metallic groan, its body shuddering as blue energy burst from the cracks in its frame.

"NOW, ULK!" Whisker yelled.

The gnome muttered a final incantation, then snapped his fingers. The floating runes shattered like glass, and the Codex dropped onto the pedestal with a dull thud.

Ulk grabbed it, stuffing the massive tome into his satchel.

The construct roared—but before it could rise again, Gornim brought his axe down in a brutal swing, splitting the guardian's skull. The light in its eyes flickered out, and the massive body collapsed into a heap of metal and dust.

The remaining skeletons wavered, their magic unraveling—and one by one, they fell, turning to nothing but bones and rags.

Panting, bleeding, and victorious, the crew stood over the wreckage.

“We have the book,” Ulk said, his voice filled with awe.

Whisker wiped blood from his fur. “Then let’s get the hell out of here.”

The vault shuddered, a deep rumble echoing through the stone halls. The place was collapsing.

They ran, dodging falling debris and crumbling walls, sprinting back toward the entrance. A massive stone beam cracked, coming down just as they dove through the iron door.

The moment they cleared the threshold, the vault behind them collapsed into darkness, sealing whatever remained inside forever.

Breathing hard, Whisker grinned, looking at the book in Ulk’s hands. “Let’s go get paid.”

With the Codex of Ithzara secured, the crew of the Black Siren climbed from the ruins, ready to collect their well-earned fortune—but in the depths of Mythwyn, unseen eyes had already taken notice of what they had stolen…

The crew of the Black Siren emerged from the ruins of the Old Quarter, breathing hard, their clothes caked in dust and dried blood. Behind them, the vault of Ithzara was sealed forever, buried beneath centuries of arcane rubble. But in Ulk’s hands, wrapped in a weathered leather satchel, was the Codex of Ithzara—a tome so powerful that men had killed and died for a mere whisper of its secrets.

“We have it,” Whisker muttered, his tail flicking as he wiped sweat from his brow. “Now let’s get paid.”

The crew moved swiftly through the abandoned alleys of the Old Quarter, keeping to the shadows, avoiding the city’s Watchmen and curious onlookers. They didn’t need trouble—not yet. Not until the gold was in their hands.

As they neared the Mercantile Quarter, the streets grew livelier. Merchants hawked enchanted relics, scholars debated theoretical magic, and street performers danced with floating fire orbs and illusionary beasts. But none of that mattered. The crew had one destination—Boren Wraithhall’s estate.

The great merchant-lord’s manor loomed ahead, a sprawling estate of polished marble and towering columns, nestled behind gilded iron gates. A pair of heavily armed guards nodded at the crew and stepped aside, letting them pass.

Inside, Boren waited in his grand dining hall, sipping a glass of deep red wine, his expression unreadable. A single candle flickered between him and the crew, casting long shadows across the room.

Whisker strode forward, tossing the leather satchel onto the table.

“The Codex of Ithzara,” he said smoothly. “As promised.”

Boren leaned forward, running his fingers over the ancient leather cover, his eyes glimmering with undeniable greed. He opened it slightly, and the letters shifted on the page, as if alive, twisting and reshaping in languages long forgotten.

“Magnificent,” he whispered.

Gornim crossed his arms. “We held up our end. Where’s the gold?”

Boren smirked, setting the book down carefully before gesturing to a nearby chest. A servant stepped forward, unlatched it, and threw it open.

Inside, gold coins gleamed under the candlelight. Five thousand pieces, neatly stacked. More money than most men made in a lifetime.

Ulk whistled. “That’s a beautiful sight.”

Hobbin grinned. “Start counting, boys.”

The crew stepped forward—but before Whisker could lay his hands on the gold, the doors behind them slammed shut.

The merchant-lord’s smirk widened. “There’s just one problem.”

From the shadows of the chamber, armored men emerged, blades drawn—Boren’s personal enforcers, a dozen strong. The crew tensed, hands on their weapons.

Gerr scowled. “You slimy bastard.”

Boren leaned back in his chair, swirling his wine lazily. “I could pay you… or I could kill you and keep both the gold and the Codex.” He sighed dramatically. “It’s just good business, you understand.”

A tense silence filled the room.

Then, Whisker grinned, sharp teeth flashing in the candlelight.

“Business? Oh, I understand perfectly.”

And with a flick of his wrist, he flung a dagger straight at Boren’s throat.

Boren barely had time to react—he jerked to the side, and the dagger sliced across his cheek, spilling a thin line of blood.

His guards lunged forward, swords flashing in the dim light.

Gornim was the first to move, meeting the charge with a roar. His axe cleaved through the first attacker’s chest, blood splattering across the floor.

Zili ducked low, her daggers flashing as she slit a guard's hamstring, sending him crashing onto his back, screaming. She didn't stop—a second blade drove into his throat, silencing him for good.

A crossbow bolt whizzed past Ulk, narrowly missing his ear. The gnome rolled behind the table, flipping it over for cover, sending wine and plates crashing onto the floor.

Crook leaped onto one of the guards, his powerful legs sending both of them tumbling. Before the man could react, Crook sank his knife into his ribs, twisting deep.

Hobbin grabbed a burning oil lamp and hurled it into the nearest enemy, flames erupting across his cloak, setting the man screaming as he stumbled, blindly flailing.

Gerr was laughing like a lunatic, flipping over a chair and stabbing upward into a guard's stomach, gutting him like a fish.

Whisker dodged a sword swing, darting around the edge of the battle, closing the distance between himself and Boren.

Boren, however, had one last trick—he muttered an arcane phrase, and his ring flared with blue light. The air crackled, and suddenly, a shimmering barrier of force surrounded him, protecting him from harm.

"Damn magic," Whisker spat. "You're just full of dirty tricks, aren't you?"

Boren smiled coldly, stepping back toward an open door behind him. "You may have the gold, but you'll never have the Codex."

With a flick of his cloak, he vanished into the corridor, the force barrier collapsing behind him.

The last of Boren's guards fell to the ground, either dead or dying. The once-grand hall was drenched in blood, bodies slumped over the table, gold coins scattered across the floor, soaked in spilled wine.

Whisker cursed, flicking blood from his blade.

"Bastard ran," Zili muttered, breathing heavily. "Should we chase him?"

Ulk shook his head. "No point. He'll have more men waiting."

Hobbin kicked over a dead body. "At least we still have the gold."

The crew stood for a moment, breathing hard, staring at the chest of five thousand gold pieces, their rightful payment.

But the Codex of Ithzara was gone.

Boren still had it.

And the bastard had just made an enemy of the Black Siren's crew.

As they loaded the gold into sacks, Gerr smirked.

"Guess we just added one more name to our kill list."

Whisker's tail flicked. "Damn right."

Boren might have gotten away this time, but the crew wasn't about to let that stand.

Because in the end, revenge was just another kind of business.

And business was good.

The Black Siren's crew left Boren's estate under the cover of night, their sacks heavy with gold, but their minds burning with unfinished business. They had been paid, yes—but Boren had walked away with the Codex. And no one betrayed the Black Siren and lived to tell the tale.

As they moved through Mythwyn's labyrinthine alleys, avoiding the city's watchmen and arcane patrols, Whisker called a halt beneath the shadows of an abandoned tower.

"We're not leaving this city without that bastard's head," he growled, flicking blood off his blade.

Gornim crossed his arms, his knuckles still red from the fight. "He knew we'd come for him. That wasn't just a double-cross—it was planned."

Zili wiped a smear of blood from her jaw. "Agreed. He had those guards ready, and that magic trick? That wasn't some last-minute defense. He had a damn escape route."

Ulk adjusted his goggles, still clutching his satchel of notes. "Then the real question is—where the hell did he run to?"

A silence hung over the group. Boren wasn't some street-level smuggler—he was a merchant-lord with deep connections. Finding him wouldn't be easy.

Gerr grinned, flipping a stolen gold coin between his fingers. "I know someone who might have an answer."

Whisker's eyes narrowed. "Who?"

"A rat, like you." Gerr chuckled. "Goes by the name of Fenwick. Knows every whisper that drips through this city. If Boren has a bolt-hole, he'll know where it is."

Whisker smirked. "Then let's pay Fenwick a visit."

Deep in the gutter alleys of the Dock Ward, beneath the ruins of an old watchtower, lay a hidden underworld where spies, cutthroats, and criminals bartered in secrets instead of gold.

And at the heart of it, sitting atop a throne of stolen cushions and old crates, was Fenwick the Rat-King.

The ratfolk informant was thin, wiry, and covered in patchy fur, his beady eyes darting from shadow to shadow even when he sat still. He wore a patched-up coat, and a collection of rings adorned his clawed fingers, each one stolen from someone who never saw it coming.

As the crew stepped into his lair, Fenwick grinned, his whiskers twitching with amusement.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't Whisker and his merry band of murderers."

Whisker crossed his arms. "We're looking for Boren Wraithhall."

Fenwick's ears perked up. "Oho, now that's a name I've been hearing a lot tonight."

Hobbin narrowed his eyes. "And?"

Fenwick stretched lazily, flicking a coin in the air before catching it. "And information ain't free, my friends."

Gornim stepped forward, cracking his knuckles. "You'd rather I pay in blood?"

Fenwick chuckled, raising his hands. "No need for threats, my big green friend. I'll tell you what you need to know… for a fair price."

Whisker tossed a small pouch of gold onto the table. "Talk."

Fenwick ran his claws through the coins, sifting them like sand, then leaned forward.

"Boren didn't run far. He's still in Mythwyn. But he's not alone."

The crew exchanged glances.

"Go on," Whisker said.

Fenwick grinned. "He's holed up in an old wizard's tower in the Celestial Gardens. He's hired protection—mercenaries, spellcasters. And word is, he's already trying to sell that book of yours to someone real powerful."

Ulk cursed. "If a wizard lord gets their hands on the Codex, we'll never see it again."

Zili's tail flicked. "So we hit him before the sale goes through."

Fenwick nodded, his grin widening. "Now you're thinking like proper scoundrels."

Whisker's claws tapped against the wooden table. "Anything else?"

Fenwick leaned in, voice low. "Yeah. Watch yourselves. Boren knows you're coming."

The crew left Fenwick's den, their minds set. They had gold, steel, and bloodlust, and soon they'd have Boren's head.

Standing in the moonlit streets of Mythwyn, Whisker turned to his crew. "We hit the tower tomorrow night. No survivors. That Codex belongs to us."

The crew grinned, weapons gleaming in the lantern light.

Boren thought he could cross the Black Siren and live.

He was about to learn just how wrong he was.

The Celestial Gardens were a world apart from the filth and grime of Mythwyn's Dock Ward. Here, the air was thick with the scent of rare flowers, and the city's arcane elite wandered among floating stone platforms and enchanted walkways, discussing theoretical magic and forbidden knowledge beneath the glow of hovering lanterns.

But the crew of the Black Siren wasn't here for polite conversation.

They stood in the shadows of a crumbling garden wall, staring up at Boren's hideout—an old wizard's tower, its black stone cracked with age, its upper floors lit by an eerie green glow.

Zili crouched low, her forked tongue flicking. "How many guards?"

Gerr smirked. "Six at the front. Probably more inside."

Ulk adjusted his goggles. "That glow at the top? That's a containment ward. Means the Codex is still here."

Whisker's tail flicked. "Then we do this fast."

The plan was simple. Gornim, Crook, and Zili would take out the guards at the front. Whisker, Gerr, and Hobbin would climb the tower from the side. Ulk would disable any wards or traps. Once inside, they would kill Boren and reclaim the Codex.

There would be no negotiations.

Gornim moved first. The orc was silent but brutal, stepping from the shadows like a ghost before cleaving the first guard's head clean off. Blood sprayed across the cobbled path, but before the other men could react, Zili was already upon them, her daggers flashing in the moonlight.

A mercenary raised his sword—Crook leaped from above, driving a spear through his chest, the impact sending both men crashing to the ground.

One of the remaining guards turned to shout—only to choke as Zili's blade slid across his throat.

The last tried to flee, but Gornim hurled a hatchet, the steel burying itself in the man's spine. He collapsed, twitching, and then lay still.

Atop the tower's wall, Whisker signaled. The outer defenses were down.

It was time to move.

Whisker, Gerr, and Hobbin moved fast, climbing up the ivy-covered stone wall.

At a side window, a guard leaned out, scanning the night. He never saw Gerr's dagger until it slid into his eye socket, the halfling grinning as he twisted the blade. The man crumpled, and the crew clambered inside.

Inside, the tower was dimly lit, the air thick with incense and spellcraft. Scrolls and arcane trinkets littered the shelves, and the walls were lined with strange, flickering symbols.

Hobbin sniffed the air. "Smells like bad magic."

Whisker nodded. "Let's find Boren and end this."

They found him on the top floor, standing before a massive circular rune, the Codex of Ithzara floating in mid-air, its pages turning as if by unseen hands.

Boren didn't even turn to face them.

"You should have taken the gold and left, Whisker." His voice was calm, almost amused. "Now you've come to die."

Whisker growled. "No. I've come to kill you."

Boren raised his hand, and the entire room exploded with power.

A wall of spectral chains lashed out, catching Hobbin across the chest and slamming him into a bookshelf.

Zili dodged a bolt of raw energy, rolling beneath a nearby table before hurling a dagger at Boren's heart—but the blade stopped mid-air, spinning uselessly before dropping to the ground.

The merchant-lord turned to face them now, and his eyes were glowing, his fingers weaving dark sigils in the air.

"Ithzara's secrets belong to me," he whispered. "And you—"

Before he could finish his spell, a heavy chair crashed into his back, sending him stumbling forward.

Boren gasped, turning—just in time for Gerr to lunge from the shadows, his dagger flashing in the dim light. The halfling drove the blade deep into Boren's side, twisting it with a cruel grin.

"No one likes a cheat," Gerr muttered.

Boren collapsed to the ground, choking on his own blood, his hands grasping at the wound as the Codex fell from the air, its runes flickering and fading.

Whisker stepped forward and planted his blade in Boren's chest, twisting hard.

"Now it belongs to us."

With Boren dead and the Codex in their hands, the crew of the Black Siren slipped back into the night.

They had come for gold.

They had found power.

And as they disappeared into Mythwyn's shadows, one thing was certain—

Their legend was just beginning.

The streets of Mythwyn were quiet as the crew of the Black Siren slipped through the alleys, their prize secured. The Codex of Ithzara sat in Ulk's satchel, wrapped in thick cloth, but even through the fabric, they could feel it—a faint, pulsing energy, as if the book was alive.

Hobbin spat onto the cobblestones. "Glad that bastard's dead. He thought he could outplay us."

Gornim grunted. "Wasn't much of a fight."

Zili eyed the book warily. "Something about that thing doesn't sit right."

Ulk adjusted his goggles. "Because it's dangerous. If the stories are true, Ithzara's knowledge could rewrite the way magic works." He hesitated, fingers tightening on the satchel. "And people will come looking for it."

Whisker's tail flicked. "Then we sell it. Find a buyer, get our gold, and move on before anyone realizes we have it."

But as they approached the docks, a cold wind swept through the city, carrying a strange, whispering sound.

Not words.

Something older. Something watching.

Gerr shivered, rubbing his arms. "Anyone else feel that?"

A bell tolled in the distance, and the lamplights along the dock flickered and dimmed.

And then—a voice, soft and ethereal, echoed through the street.

"The Codex does not belong to you."

The crew spun around, weapons drawn.

Standing in the middle of the street was a hooded figure, draped in deep violet robes, their face hidden in shadow. Around them, the air shimmered with latent energy, and the cobblestones beneath their feet seemed to twist and shift, warping reality itself.

Whisker bared his teeth. “And who the hell are you?”

The figure lifted a hand, and suddenly, the world around them dimmed, as if reality itself had pulled away.

“I am the one who will take back what was stolen.”

The Codex in Ulk’s bag pulsed violently, and an invisible force slammed into the crew, sending them staggering backward.

The air warped and twisted around the robed figure, the streetlights flickering as though reality itself had grown uncertain in their presence. The Codex of Ithzara trembled inside Ulk’s satchel, its unseen power reacting to the intruder’s presence.

Whisker steadied himself, one claw resting on the hilt of his saber. “You picked the wrong crew to haunt, spell-slinger.”

The figure did not move. “That book was never meant for mortal hands. Give it to me, and I will grant you mercy.”

Hobbin snorted, gripping his hammer. “We just gutted a merchant-lord for this prize. You think we’re handing it over ‘cause you asked nicely?”

The stranger sighed, and though their face remained shrouded in the darkness of their hood, the voice carried a quiet, eerie certainty. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

Then, with a whispered incantation, the ground beneath them erupted.

A shockwave of raw arcane force blasted outward, sending the crew staggering.

Zili barely dodged in time, rolling across the cobblestones as blackened tendrils of energy lashed out from the stranger’s fingertips, twisting like shadowy vipers.

Gornim roared, planting his feet and swinging his axe in a brutal arc, but the moment the blade should have connected, the figure simply wasn’t there anymore—as though reality had folded around them, letting the strike pass harmlessly through.

Ulk scrambled for a counterspell, his hands shaking as he fumbled through his components. “That’s no ordinary mage—”

A wave of unnatural cold swept through the alley. The air stank of old parchment, of something ancient and rotting.

Then came the whispers.

They were inside their minds—many voices, overlapping, speaking forgotten languages, their words scratching against the edges of reality.

Gerr clutched his skull, gritting his teeth. “Get out of my damn head!”

The robed figure advanced. Reality bent with each step, the air around them fracturing like glass.

“You are not worthy of Ithzara’s gift,” they murmured. “Give it to me, and be spared.”

Whisker’s tail flicked sharply. Enough of this.

With a single, fluid motion, he drew his saber and lunged.

The blade sliced through the stranger’s robe—but beneath the fabric, there was nothing but emptiness.

No flesh. No body.

The figure tilted their head slightly, as if amused.

Then they raised a hand, and the street vanished into blackness.

The crew barely had time to shout, to react—one moment, they were in the streets of Mythwyn, the next, they were falling.

The world collapsed into ink-black nothingness, and they plunged into the abyss.

The last thing they heard was the stranger’s voice, calm and final:

“The Codex must return to its rightful place.”

Then the void swallowed them whole.

The crew fell through darkness, weightless, their stomachs twisting as if they had been cast into the depths of the abyss itself. The air was thick and suffocating, filled with whispers in a language that was older than time, voices pressing into their minds like cold fingers clawing at their thoughts.

Then, with a sudden, bone-jarring impact, they hit solid ground.

A heavy silence followed, broken only by the ragged sound of breathing.

Whisker groaned, pushing himself up. His claws scraped against cold stone—not cobblestones, not wood, but something unnatural, a surface that felt slick like glass but rough as broken coral.

Gornim cursed, rolling onto his back. “Where in the nine hells are we?”

The crew gathered themselves, looking around. They were in a vast, lightless chamber, its ceiling lost in shadows, the walls carved with shifting, unreadable symbols that moved when they weren't looking directly at them.

A faint, pulsing glow emanated from the Codex, still clutched in Ulk's hands. The book hummed with power, as if it recognized this place.

Zili narrowed her eyes. "This is no alley in Mythwyn."

A voice slithered through the darkness, soft and calm, yet carrying a weight that pressed against their chests like an ocean of unseen force.

"You have brought the Codex where it belongs."

The hooded figure from the alley stepped forward, emerging from nothingness, their robes no longer flowing like cloth, but shifting like smoke caught between worlds.

Whisker bared his teeth, drawing his blade. "You're making a mistake, spell-slinger. That book belongs to us."

The figure tilted their head slightly, as if amused.

"You do not understand what you carry," they said, their voice layered, as if spoken by many mouths at once. "But you will. The Codex has already chosen you."

A pulse of arcane energy rippled through the chamber, and the crew felt something tug at them, deep inside their bones.

The walls around them began to shift, their surfaces melting into endless corridors, spiraling passages that led to nowhere and everywhere at once.

The air grew heavy, pressing in. The whispers turned to laughter.

They weren't in Mythwyn anymore.

They weren't even in their own world.

And the real nightmare was only beginning.

The world around them twisted, the chamber's walls warping and shifting into endless spiraling corridors, passages that bent at impossible angles, leading into depths unknown. The air shuddered, thick with whispers that spoke in no tongue they knew—but somehow understood.

Ulk's hands clenched around the Codex. The leather-bound tome throbbed, its pages vibrating as if hungry for something.

Whisker's tail lashed. "Where in the abyss have you taken us?"

The hooded figure stood motionless, their body seeming half-there, half-not, shifting with the flickering, unreal light of the labyrinth.

"You walk the halls of Ithzara's memory now."

The crew exchanged uneasy glances.

Gornim growled. "Memory or not, I want out."

Zili's sharp eyes scanned the passages. "There's no wind here. No scent. No time."

The figure stepped forward, and the space around them twisted again, the corridor behind them vanishing as if it had never existed.

Hobbin's grip tightened around his hammer. "I don't like magic tricks."

The figure ignored him. Their voice reverberated through the air, layered and unnatural. "The Codex has already chosen you. And now, you will face its trials."

The Codex pulsed, and before Ulk could even react, the pages flung themselves open.

The walls around them melted, and suddenly, the crew stood on the deck of a ship—but not the Black Siren.

This ship was different—ancient, blackened with age, its sails tattered, its mast twisted like gnarled bone. The air smelled of salt and rot, but worse than that… it smelled wrong.

Figures moved across the deck, their shadows stretching unnaturally, flickering like half-formed memories.

A low voice whispered from the rigging, deep and hollow.

"Do you see them?"

The crew turned—then froze.

Because the figures on deck weren't strangers.

They were themselves.

But not as they were now.

Each version of them was scarred, broken, twisted, as if something had worn them down to hollowed-out husks, their eyes black pits, their expressions empty.

And they were coming straight for them.

Whisker bared his teeth. "This is a gods-damned trick."

The other Whisker smirked. "Is it?"

Then the twisted versions of themselves drew their weapons and attacked.

Steel clashed against steel, the sound echoing through the unnatural void. The Black Siren's crew faced their own twisted reflections, each one a corrupted version of themselves—scarred, hollow-eyed, and smiling with cruel intent.

Whisker barely dodged as his doppelgänger lunged, the shadowy twin's cutlass slicing through the air, missing his throat by inches.

"This is some cursed magic!" Whisker spat, parrying the next blow. "I don't need a darker version of myself—I'm already the worst bastard I know!"

His other self grinned, eyes like black voids. "Not yet."

The two Whiskers clashed, blades flashing in rapid strikes, neither gaining the upper hand.

Gornim let out a roar, blocking an overhead axe swing from his other self. His doppelgänger was faster, leaner, his muscles coiled like a predator's.

"You don't fight like me," Gornim growled, gritting his teeth. "You fight like a damn beast."

His reflection sneered. "That's because I stopped holding back."

The corrupted Gornim dropped low and drove his fist into the real Gornim's ribs, knocking the wind from his lungs.

Before the orc could recover, the twisted version grabbed him by the throat and lifted him off the ground.

"You're weak," the shadowed voice hissed. "That's why you'll lose."

With a snarl, Gornim drove his knee into his doppelgänger's gut, breaking free and swinging his axe in a brutal arc—hitting true, cleaving deep into his own reflection's shoulder.

Hobbin smashed his hammer into his copy's knee, shattering bone, but the twisted version of himself didn't even scream.

Instead, it laughed, reaching out with bony, claw-like fingers and grabbing Hobbin's beard, yanking him forward.

"You waste your strength keeping the crew alive," the other Hobbin whispered, voice like dry parchment. "You should have let them starve."

Hobbin snarled and swung again, this time aiming for the skull.

The dark version of himself crumbled into dust.

Zili fought with fluid precision, ducking and weaving around her mirror self's attacks.

But this other version of her had no hesitation, no restraint—just pure, ruthless instinct.

“You think you’re fast,” her reflection whispered, “but you hesitate. You still hold onto honor.”

Zili bared her fangs. “I hold onto what I damn well please.”

Then, in one swift movement, she twisted around her doppelgänger and drove her dagger straight into the thing’s throat.

It choked, trying to speak, before it collapsed into black mist.

One by one, the crew cut down their own dark selves, the echoes of their twisted reflections dissolving into nothingness.

The whispers in the air faded. The ship beneath them shuddered, then began to dissolve.

The hooded figure’s voice returned, soft and amused.

“You have defeated your past. But there is more yet to come.”

The world twisted again—

And the crew fell into darkness once more.

The crew of the Black Siren plummeted through darkness, their stomachs twisting as reality ripped and reformed around them. The echoes of their defeated reflections faded, replaced by the familiar yet unsettling scent of salt and decay.

When they hit solid ground, it wasn’t stone beneath them this time.

It was wet wood.

The sound of waves lapping against the hull filled their ears. The air was thick with the stink of rot, seawater, and something older—something wrong.

Whisker groaned, pushing himself up. His claws scraped against slick, algae-covered planks.

He knew this place.

They all did.

They were standing on the deck of the Black Siren—but it was not their ship.

The wood beneath their feet was splintered and warped, the masts sagging, the sails torn and covered in barnacles. The lanterns swayed, but their light was sickly green, casting long, twisting shadows.

The ship was dead.

And they were not alone.

A low moan rolled across the deck.

Figures emerged from the mist, their forms half-seen through the shifting, unnatural fog. They moved like sailors, their bodies clad in tattered rags, their faces twisted and sunken as though they had spent centuries beneath the waves.

Then came the recognition—these were men and women the Black Siren's crew had killed before.

Zili's eyes narrowed. "They should not be walking."

Hobbin's grip tightened on his hammer. "They damn well shouldn't."

A figure stepped forward, taller than the rest.

A captain's coat hung from its skeletal frame, its face a hollowed-out ruin of rotting flesh, its eyes glowing with deep, malevolent green light.

It lifted a barnacle-covered cutlass, pointing at the crew.

"You sent us to the deep," it rasped, its voice like wind through a cracked hull. "Now the sea sends us back."

The dead crew charged, weapons raised.

And the living crew of the Black Siren had no choice but to fight.

The dead sailors rushed forward, their hollow eyes glowing with eerie green light, their waterlogged weapons raised high. Some still bore the scars of their deaths—split skulls, missing limbs, rusted blades lodged in their ribs—but none of it slowed them.

The Black Siren's crew met them head-on.

Whisker ducked low, his cutlass flashing as he slashed through the gut of a revenant, its rotting insides spilling onto the deck. But the thing did not fall—it merely grinned, its jaw unhinging with an awful creak.

"No," it rasped, swinging a rusted cleaver.

Whisker barely twisted away in time.

Gornim's axe split a skeletal raider in two, but as the bones clattered to the deck, they knit themselves back together, the corpse rising again as if it had never fallen.

"They don't stay dead!" Gornim snarled.

Hobbin swung his hammer in a brutal arc, crushing the skull of another revenant, but even as it collapsed, its fingers twitched, its broken body beginning to pull itself back together.

"Ain't a fair fight if they don't stay down," Hobbin growled.

Zili fought with precision, her twin daggers slicing tendons, severing limbs, but the undead didn't feel pain. A skeletal pirate grabbed her by the throat, pulling her close.

Its breath reeked of salt and death.

"You left us to drown," it hissed.

Zili twisted free, slamming her dagger into its eye socket before kicking it overboard.

Crook leaped from the rigging, his sword plunging into the chest of a bloated corpse, driving it back, but the thing grabbed him, pulling him close with unnatural strength.

"You'll join us," it gurgled.

Crook gritted his teeth and shoved both feet against its chest, ripping his blade free, sending the thing toppling into the misty abyss.

Ulk frantically flipped through the Codex, searching for something—anything—to break the curse.

Then his eyes widened.

"The ship itself is the anchor!" he shouted. "We have to destroy it, or they'll keep coming!"

Whisker grinned despite the chaos. "Now that's a plan I like."

Hobbin turned toward the nearest powder kegs. "Then let's sink this damned ghost ship!"

The crew fought their way below deck, hacking through the relentless undead. They smashed open barrels of oil, lit torches, and hurled them across the cursed wood.

Fire caught quickly, the flames licking up the rotting mast, consuming the damned vessel.

The undead screamed, their bodies turning to ash as the ship groaned and split apart, sending its cursed crew back into the abyss from which they had crawled.

The moment the ship shattered, the world around them twisted again—

And they woke up.

They were back in the ruins of the Old Quarter, the Codex of Ithzara pulsing in Ulk's hands.

The hooded figure was gone.

And the trial was over.

But something felt different—as if the Codex had marked them, had changed something deep inside each of them.

And somewhere, in the shadows of Mythwyn, unseen eyes were watching.

The crew of the Black Siren stood in the ruins of the Old Quarter, their bodies aching, their breaths ragged. But they were alive.

The ghostly ship was gone, the undead sailors vanished, yet the memory of the cursed battle still lingered—the cold grip of the drowned, the whispers of the dead, the sensation of being dragged toward something beyond the grave.

And at the heart of it all, the Codex of Ithzara pulsed in Ulk's hands, its worn leather cover shifting, as if the book itself was breathing.

Zili narrowed her eyes at it. "That thing almost got us killed."

Ulk wiped the sweat from his forehead. "No, that thing saved us. It showed us what it wanted to show us."

Whisker's tail flicked sharply. "And what the hell does that mean?"

Ulk hesitated. He could still hear the whispers, though fainter now, like a distant tide. The book's power had touched them—changed them. He knew it. They all knew it.

Hobbin spat onto the cracked stone floor. "We need to get rid of it. Sell it. Bury it. Something."

But before anyone could agree, a new voice rang through the ruins.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

The crew spun around, weapons drawn.

Standing atop a crumbling staircase was a man in long crimson robes, his golden eyes glowing in the moonlight. He carried no weapon, but power radiated from him like heat from a forge.

He smiled—not friendly, not hostile, but knowing.

"You've stolen something precious," he said, his voice calm. "And I'm afraid you're not the only ones who want it."

A cold wind swept through the ruins.

And in the distance, beyond the crumbling archways, other figures began to appear—watching, waiting.

The Black Siren's crew stood in the ruins of the Old Quarter, their breath heavy, their minds racing. The Codex of Ithzara pulsed in Ulk's hands, its unnatural glow casting long shadows over the cracked stone.

And now, they were surrounded.

The man in crimson robes stood before them, his golden eyes burning with quiet intensity. Behind him, other figures emerged from the darkness, cloaked figures, their presence weighing on the air like a coming storm.

"You don't understand what you carry," the robed man said, stepping forward. "The Codex is not a treasure. It is a beacon."

Whisker's grip tightened on his saber. "A beacon for what?"

The man smiled coldly. "For Ithzara herself."

The earth trembled.

A deep groan echoed through the ruins, as if the city itself was waking up. The sky darkened, and the air became thick with whispers, the same voices they had heard in the Labyrinth, on the cursed ship, in their own minds.

Zili's tail flicked in unease. "We need to get rid of that thing. Now."

Gornim grunted. "Aye. But how?"

Ulk flipped open the Codex, the pages shifting and twisting like living flesh, symbols reordering themselves. His hands shook, his breathing ragged. The book wanted something. It wanted them to read. It wanted them to listen.

And then, it spoke.

"I am the key."

The voice slithered through their bones, deep, ancient, and wrong.

The ruins shuddered again, and from the shadows between the stones, something began to rise—a shape vast and shifting, a figure neither human nor beast, formed from coiling darkness and spectral energy.

Hobbin's knuckles whitened on his hammer. "That… is not a normal spell."

Whisker snarled. "Ulk! How do we end this?"

The gnome's hands blurred over the Codex's pages, sweat dripping from his brow. "The book can't be thrown away—it has to be unmade! Burned in arcane fire, in a place where no magic can rebuild it."

Crook's eyes widened. "Where the hell do we find that?"

A low chuckle came from the crimson-robed man. "You already have it."

His hand gestured toward the ruins themselves.

A broken well.

A pit lined with ancient runes, its edges cracked, yet still humming with old power.

A dead zone. A place where magic was broken and would never heal.

The perfect grave for the Codex.

Whisker acted first.

He snatched the book from Ulk's hands, the Codex screaming in protest, its pages twisting and trying to rewrite themselves, runes bursting into the air like cursed fireflies.

With a snarl, he hurled the Codex into the well.

For a moment—nothing.

Then—

A howling scream tore through the air, not from the book, but from everywhere, from the walls, from the sky, from the depths of the world itself.

The spectral figure lurched forward, its form unraveling, its many eyes wide with rage and fear.

"NO. YOU CANNOT END ME."

The runed pit flared, ancient glyphs burning bright for the first time in centuries—and the Codex of Ithzara was consumed.

The pages curled and blackened, the ink bled away, and the whispers fell silent.

The shadowy form shrieked one last time—then was gone.

The world steadied.

The darkness faded.

The ruins of the Old Quarter were silent once more.

The man in crimson robes watched, then gave a slow nod. "It is done."

The crew stood in exhausted silence, the weight of the past few days settling onto their shoulders.

Hobbin grunted. "Next time, we sell the cursed relics. No more noble deeds."

Whisker looked at his crew. They had survived sorcery, the undead, and a hunt through Mythwyn's darkest corners.

And they were still standing.

He grinned. “Let’s get a drink.”

The Black Siren sailed from Mythwyn before dawn, her crew heavier with scars, but lighter in spirit. They had defied something ancient, something that should have destroyed them—but in the end, they were still just pirates looking for their next fortune.

The Codex was gone.

The curse was broken.

A Game of Dice

The Whining Mermaid was alive with laughter, rolling dice, and the clink of overflowing tankards. The Black Siren’s crew sat at their usual table, basking in the victory of survival.

Hobbin slammed down a fresh keg of ale, grinning as he filled their mugs to the brim. “To burning cursed books and living to tell about it!”

“And to never touching magic again,” Gerr added, throwing back a gulp.

The night stretched on, the crew drinking deep, throwing dice, telling exaggerated tales of past plunders.

Then the stranger arrived.

The door creaked open, and a man stepped inside—a thin, sharp-eyed figure, his cloak patched and road-worn, his hands hidden in long sleeves. He moved like he belonged everywhere and nowhere, gliding toward their table with an easy smirk.

“Room for one more?” he asked, voice smooth as oiled silk.

Whisker’s tail flicked, his instincts immediately on edge. But ale was flowing, and a fresh coin purse meant fresh wagers.

“Buy in’s ten silver,” Zili said, rolling the dice in her palm.

The stranger tossed a small pouch onto the table. It jingled—full and heavy. “I’ll make it twenty.”

The game began.

The dice rolled, silver exchanged hands, and the night stretched on.

But something was off.

The stranger won too often. Too cleanly. His hands moved too smoothly, and though his dice seemed fair, there was something... off about them.

Then, as Whisker watched closely, he saw it—

A flick of the wrist, a slight pressure on the table.

The bastard was cheating.

Whisker's smile never faltered, but his claws tightened around his tankard.

"Luck's favoring you tonight," he said smoothly. "What's your secret?"

The stranger grinned, but before he could speak, Gornim moved.

With one massive hand, the orc grabbed the stranger's wrist and slammed it onto the table.

Dice spilled from his sleeve—loaded dice.

The tavern went silent.

The stranger winced, but his smirk remained. "Now, now. No need for violence."

Gerr picked up the weighted dice, turning them over in his palm. "You really thought you'd swindle *us*?"

The stranger chuckled, shaking his head. "Gentlemen, let's not make a scene—"

The back door of the tavern creaked open.

And before the crew could react, three men slipped inside, blades gleaming in the dim candlelight.

The stranger's smirk widened.

"I believe we're past introductions, but let's make things simple. You're in my way."

The crew stood slowly, hands moving toward their weapons, tension thick as smoke.

Whisker's ears twitched. "You've got one chance to explain yourself before we start spilling blood."

The stranger sighed, dusting off his sleeve.

"You've caught me cheating, fair enough. But I didn't come here to swindle you out of silver." His gaze hardened, his smirk fading. "I came here because you have something the Thieves' Guild wants."

A pause.

Zili's tail flicked. "We don't work for the Guild."

The stranger chuckled. "No, but you stepped into our business when you killed Boren Wraithhall."

The name hung in the air like a curse.

Gornim crossed his arms. "The bastard tried to rob us first."

The stranger nodded. "And that's the problem. You see, Boren was working for *us*."

The crew exchanged glances.

Hobbin frowned. "You telling us that merchant-lord was one of your rats?"

The stranger leaned forward, lowering his voice. "He wasn't one of us—but he owed us a great deal of gold. And now that he's dead, his debts are unpaid. That's bad for business."

He let the words sink in before he added:

"So here's what's going to happen. You're going to do a job for the Guild—one that pays off Boren's debt—or we're going to make your lives *very* difficult."

Whisker's claws tapped the table.

"And what if we'd rather gut you and be on our way?"

The stranger's smirk returned. "Then you'll be hunted by the most dangerous people in Mythwyn."

He leaned in, voice like poisoned silk.

"And trust me, Captain. You don't want the Guild as your enemy."

The crew was silent.

Then, slowly, Whisker leaned back, his expression unreadable.

"What's the job?"

The stranger smiled.

"You're going to steal something."

The tavern's candlelight flickered.

The Black Siren's crew sat in silence, their hands near their weapons, their minds turning over the stranger's words. Outside, the city of Mythwyn whispered in the night—a city of scholars and wizards, but also of thieves and killers, where deals were signed in ink and settled in blood.

And now, they had been dragged into one of those deals.

Whisker took a slow sip of ale, then set his tankard down. “Let’s say we take this job. What exactly are we stealing?”

The stranger smirked. “Something Boren was supposed to get for us. A ring.”

Ulk frowned. “A magic ring?”

The stranger tilted his head. “That’s one way to put it. The Ring of Silent Ash.”

The name hung in the air, unfamiliar yet heavy.

Zili’s tail flicked in irritation. “Never heard of it.”

The stranger chuckled. “Of course you haven’t. It’s kept under lock and key, hidden inside the Guildmaster’s vault.”

The crew exchanged glances.

Hobbin snorted. “You’re having a laugh. You want us to rob *your own guild?*”

The stranger leaned forward, his eyes gleaming with amusement and something else—desperation. “Not the Guild. The *Guildmaster*. Big difference.”

Gornim crossed his arms, frowning. “Why?”

The stranger’s smirk faded. “Because if that ring stays in his hands, we’re all dead.”

A pause.

Whisker’s claws tapped the table. “Talk.”

The stranger sighed, rolling the dice absently between his fingers.

“The Guildmaster, Dain Varyss, is not just running the Thieves’ Guild. He’s consolidating power. The Ring of Silent Ash—it’s cursed, but not in the usual way. It lets him hear things. Secrets whispered in the dark. People *planning* against him. He’s already snuffed out three rival factions without a single warning.”

His voice lowered, turning sharp as a dagger.

“Now he’s looking inward. He wants to clean house. And anyone who *might* oppose him? We’re next.”

Gerr grinned, flipping a coin. “So, let me guess. You’re planning a coup?”

The stranger’s smile was thin, but wicked. “Something like that.”

Whisker’s tail flicked. “And if we say no?”

The stranger leaned back, looking entirely too comfortable.

“Then the Guild will know you killed Boren, and they’ll hunt you across Mythwyn. Your ship will be burned in the harbor before dawn. Your names will be written in blood.”

The room fell into silence.

Then Whisker grinned, sharp and deadly. “You could’ve just led with that.”

He tossed back the last of his ale, wiped his mouth, and gripped the hilt of his saber.

“Alright, then. Tell us how we’re breaking into the most dangerous vault in Mythwyn.”

The stranger’s smile widened.

The heist was on.

The Whining Mermaid’s lanterns burned low, casting long shadows across the table where the Black Siren’s crew and the stranger plotted their next move.

The target: The Vault of Dain Varyss, Guildmaster of Mythwyn’s Thieves’ Guild.

The prize: The Ring of Silent Ash, a cursed artifact that let the Guildmaster hear secrets whispered anywhere in the city.

The problem: The vault was beneath the Guild’s stronghold, protected by mercenaries, traps, and sorcery.

The stranger—who finally introduced himself as Rhett Marrow, a rogue and former guild member—spread out a roughly drawn map of the stronghold on the ale-stained table.

“The vault is underground,” he explained, tapping the map with a calloused finger. “But you can’t just waltz in through the front door. Varyss has the best killers in Mythwyn guarding that entrance.”

Gornim cracked his knuckles. “So we don’t use the front door.”

Rhett grinned. “Exactly. We go in through the *sewers*.”

Hobbin made a face. “I already don’t like this job.”

Ulk adjusted his goggles, studying the map. “How do we get past the vault’s magical wards?”

Rhett slid a small glass vial across the table. Inside, a swirling purple liquid pulsed faintly. “Warding breaker,” he said. “Expensive. Stolen from an enchanter. One drop on the door, and the spells unravel long enough for us to get inside.”

Zili drummed her claws against the table. “And the ring? It won’t just be sitting on a shelf.”

Rhett's smirk didn't waver. "No. Varyss keeps it on him at all times. That's why we need to get into his private chamber."

Whisker exhaled sharply. "So we're not just robbing a vault. We're sneaking into the personal quarters of the most dangerous man in Mythwyn."

Rhett shrugged. "Would you rather fight your way in?"

Gerr grinned, flicking his dagger between his fingers. "Wouldn't be the first time."

Whisker studied the map for a long moment. Then he smirked.

"Alright, boys. Let's go rob the Thieves' Guild."

At midnight, the crew moved through the silent streets of Mythwyn, keeping to the shadows.

Rhett led them to an iron grate behind an abandoned warehouse, overgrown with vines and filth. He pried it open, revealing a tunnel leading down into the sewers.

The stench hit them instantly.

Hobbin gagged. "This is worse than that rotting fish cargo we hauled last winter."

Crook sniffed the air. "Smells like home."

One by one, they climbed down into the darkness, boots sloshing in ankle-deep water, the only light a faint blue glow from Ulk's enchanted lantern.

The tunnels stretched in every direction, some leading into collapsed ruins, others sealed off with rusted iron doors.

Rhett motioned for silence, whispering, "We follow this tunnel until we reach the Guild's catacombs. There's an entrance there—an old passage that only a few people know about."

Zili's tail flicked. "And if someone else knows about it?"

Rhett smiled grimly. "Then we kill them before they raise the alarm."

With weapons ready, the Black Siren's crew moved deeper into the shadows.

They were in the Guild's territory now.

And if they were caught, there would be no escape.

The sewers of Mythwyn twisted like a labyrinth, a maze of tunnels carved beneath the city over centuries. The air was thick with damp rot, the distant echo of dripping water and scurrying rats the only sounds beyond their own footsteps.

The Black Siren's crew moved carefully, following Rhett's lead, their boots silent against the slick stone. They were deep in Thieves' Guild territory now—one wrong move, and they'd be gutted and left to rot in the tunnels.

At the end of a long, narrow passage, they reached a rusted iron door, half-hidden beneath layers of moss and grime.

Rhett wiped a hand across the surface. "This leads to the old catacombs beneath the Guild's stronghold." He turned to Ulk. "Can you pick it?"

Ulk smirked. "Can a dwarf drink ale?"

The gnome dropped to one knee, pulling out his lockpicks, his small hands moving with expert precision.

Click. Click. Cl—

A faint snapping sound.

"Got it." Ulk grinned, pushing the door open.

Beyond lay a stone passage, lined with crumbling archways, leading into the ancient crypts beneath the Guild's fortress.

The moment they stepped inside, the air changed.

It was colder here, unnaturally so. The walls were carved with old sigils, some so worn they were nearly unreadable. Rows of dust-covered coffins rested in alcoves along the sides, long-forgotten thieves buried beneath their own stronghold.

Hobbin frowned. "Why do these places always feel cursed?"

Zili ran her claws across one of the carved names. "Because they usually are."

Rhett motioned for silence. "No talking. The Guild keeps guards in these tunnels. We get spotted, the job's over."

They pressed on, moving quickly and quietly through the crypts, weaving between the old stone pillars and past collapsed walls.

Then—

A faint flicker of light up ahead.

Whisker's ears twitched. "Guards."

Two guild enforcers stood at the next junction, leaning against the walls, lazily talking, their torches flickering in the dim light.

Hobbin whispered. "We taking 'em quiet or loud?"

Whisker smirked. “Always quiet.”

Before the guards even sensed danger, the crew moved. Gerr was first, sliding behind the nearest guard, a dagger slipping between ribs before the man even had a chance to scream. Zili sprang from the shadows, her blade dragging across the second man’s throat, cutting deep. Crook caught the torch before it could fall, snuffing the light in one smooth motion.

The bodies slumped to the ground.

Rhett nodded approvingly. “Nice work.”

They dragged the corpses into the shadows, wiped their blades clean, and pressed forward.

The vault was close.

And the Ring of Silent Ash waited inside.

The Black Siren’s crew moved deeper into the Guild’s stronghold, their footsteps silent, their weapons ready.

The catacombs opened into a massive underground hall, lit by hanging lanterns casting a dim, flickering glow across the stone walls. In the center of the chamber stood a reinforced iron door, adorned with intricate glyphs and arcane symbols—the Vault of Dain Varyss, Guildmaster of Mythwyn.

Ulk whistled low. “That’s a lot of magic keeping us out.”

Rhett smirked, pulling out the vial of warding breaker. “Good thing we came prepared.”

Ulk carefully uncorked the vial, dipping a thin metal rod into the swirling purple liquid. With delicate precision, he traced the mixture along the glowing runes.

The glyphs shuddered, flickered—then collapsed inward, their glow fading into nothingness.

Hobbin grinned. “Well, that’s one problem solved.”

Whisker nodded. “Now let’s get inside before someone notices.”

The iron door creaked open, revealing a vault lined with gold, weapons, and artifacts stolen from across the city. The air was thick with the scent of aged parchment, leather, and something older—something unnatural.

And there, on a black velvet pedestal in the center of the room, lay the Ring of Silent Ash.

The band was made of dark silver, carved with whispering runes, and at its center sat a shard of obsidian, swirling with faint mist.

Rhett exhaled sharply. “There it is.”

Whisker stepped forward. “Let’s grab it and—”

A deep voice echoed through the vault.

“You really should have stayed out of my affairs.”

The crew spun around, weapons raised—

And there, standing in the doorway, was Dain Varyss himself.

The Guildmaster of Mythwyn.

And he wasn’t alone.

Behind him, a dozen enforcers blocked the exit, blades drawn, grinning like wolves.

Varyss stepped forward, his eyes cold, knowing. His hand lifted, and the Ring of Silent Ash floated into the air, slipping onto his finger.

The air shifted.

And suddenly, the crew could hear whispers—every secret, every lie, every betrayal—crawling into their minds.

Varyss smirked. “Let’s see if you live long enough to regret this.”

The air in the vault turned heavy, as if the walls themselves were pressing inward. The whispers from the Ring of Silent Ash grew louder, crawling into the crew’s minds like a thousand unseen fingers, prying at their secrets, their fears, their weaknesses.

Whisker’s claws twitched on his saber. He could feel the ring searching through his thoughts, peeling away his lies, digging into memories even he had tried to forget.

Across the room, Gornim’s grip tightened on his axe, his breath sharp. His own reflection in the polished gold hoard seemed to grin at him, taunting him.

Hobbin shook his head violently. “This ain't normal magic.”

The Guildmaster, Dain Varyss, smirked. “You feel it, don’t you? The weight of every whispered word in Mythwyn.” His fingers flexed, and the ring pulsed with dark energy. “You came to steal from me. Now you’ll see what it’s like to have nowhere to hide.”

With a flick of his wrist, the torches in the vault snuffed out.

And then, the shadows attacked.

The Guild enforcers lunged, their blades glinting in the dim, eerie glow of the ring’s power. Zili reacted first, rolling to the side as a dagger whistled past her ear. She snapped her tail around her attacker’s legs, pulling them off balance, before plunging a dagger into their ribs. Gerr vanished into the darkness, moving like a ghost, his daggers flashing as he cut down an enforcer before they even saw him. Crook leapt onto a pile of treasure, using his powerful

legs to launch himself through the air, crashing into a guard and snapping their neck with a quick twist.

But the whispers continued, sinking deeper into their minds.

Hobbin nearly staggered, the voices turning his own thoughts against him. A vision of his crew turning on him flashed before his eyes.

"They don't respect you."
"They laugh at your rules, your rationing, your order."
"You'll be the first to die."

His grip on his hammer loosened for just a second—

And that's when a blade slashed across his arm, drawing blood.

"DAMN THIS CURSED MAGIC!" Hobbin roared, shaking off the illusion, swinging his hammer in a wild arc, crushing the skull of his attacker.

Ulk gritted his teeth, scrambling toward the pedestal.

"We have to get the ring off him! It's fueling the whispers!"

Whisker lunged at the Guildmaster, his cutlass flashing, but Varyss barely moved—he simply stepped back, and Whisker's own shadow twisted up from the floor, grabbing his wrist, stopping the strike.

The Guildmaster smirked. "Your instincts are sharp, Captain. But even you can't fight something that knows your every move."

Whisker snarled, twisting free, only to see Varyss raise a hand.

The shadows coiled together, forming a serpentine tendril, which lashed forward like a whip.

But before it could strike, Gornim barreled forward, roaring, his axe swinging in a brutal arc.

Varyss barely dodged, but it forced him off balance.

That was all Whisker needed.

With a snarl, he lunged again, this time grabbing Varyss's hand.

The ring burned against his palm, pulsing, resisting—

And then Whisker ripped it free.

The moment the Ring of Silent Ash left Varyss's finger, the whispers stopped.

The Guildmaster staggered, his once-unstoppable presence suddenly frail, his power severed.

Zili acted fast. She grabbed a torch from the wall, the flame flaring back to life, and hurled it toward the pedestal.

The velvet and wooden base ignited instantly.

Ulk, seeing the opportunity, yanked open a satchel of black powder.

"Burn it all."

The crew scattered, cutting down the last of the enforcers as the vault erupted into fire.

Varyss snarled, trying to flee—

But Whisker grabbed him by the collar, shoving him toward the growing flames.

"You should've known better than to play with fire."

The last thing the Black Siren's crew saw as they escaped the vault was the Guildmaster screaming, his empire of gold and secrets burning around him.

They ran through the catacombs, the flames spreading behind them, smoke filling the tunnels.

They burst into the sewer tunnels, breathing hard, covered in blood and soot—but alive.

Hobbin spat. "That was too damn close."

Ulk wiped soot from his face, staring at the ring in Whisker's palm. "So what do we do with it?"

Whisker looked down at the cursed relic, the obsidian gemstone still swirling with mist.

Then, without a word—

He threw it into the sewer water.

It sank into the blackness and was gone.

By sunrise, the Black Siren was already sailing out of Mythwyn's harbor, her sails catching the wind, her crew laughing over stolen ale and bruised ribs.

They had stolen from the most dangerous man in the city.

They had burned his empire to the ground.

And by the time the Thieves' Guild rebuilt, the Black Siren would be nothing but a legend whispered in the night.

The only kind of whisper that Varyss would never hear again.

The Whining Mermaid Inn was quiet tonight, the usual noise of drunken sailors and dice games reduced to low murmurs. A few men sat at their tables, drinking lazily, while a hooded figure slipped through the door, moving with his usual confidence.

Rhett Marrow.

The crew had expected him.

He didn't see Gerr and Zili in the shadows near the entrance. He didn't notice Hobbin standing behind the bar, gripping a heavy wooden club. He didn't realize Crook was perched in the rafters, watching like a vulture.

No, Rhett only saw Whisker, sitting at a back table, a single tankard of ale in front of him, his tail flicking lazily.

"Captain," Rhett said smoothly as he approached. "I was just about to come looking for you."

Whisker tilted his head. "That so?"

Rhett smirked. "Word is that Varyss is finished. The Guild's in chaos. Looks like my gamble paid off."

Whisker took a slow sip of ale, setting his tankard down. "It did. We got your job done."

"And now you're richer for it," Rhett said, eyes gleaming. "So, how about we talk about our next opportunity?"

Whisker grinned, sharp and knowing.

"Oh, we're already talking about it."

Before Rhett could react, Zili moved from the shadows, her blade pressed against his back.

He stiffened, his smirk faltering. "Well. This is unexpected."

Hobbin stepped forward, cracking his knuckles. "You made a mistake, rat."

Rhett chuckled, though there was a new tightness in his voice. "A mistake? Gentlemen, I gave you the greatest heist of your careers."

Whisker leaned forward, his voice quiet but deadly.

"You threatened my crew. You set us up to die. And now, you think you walk away?"

Rhett's smirk vanished completely. "Now, Captain—"

Crook dropped from the rafters. A rope slipped over Rhett's throat.

In seconds, the Black Siren's crew had him bound, his hands tied behind his back, his body forced down onto the tavern table.

The few patrons who had been watching quickly looked away. They knew better than to get involved.

Gornim set a dagger on the table. “This is how we deal with liars.”

Rhett struggled, but he wasn’t getting free. His clever words were useless now.

“I can get you more gold!” he hissed. “More jobs! More power!”

Whisker smiled coldly. “I don’t need more jobs.”

He grabbed the dagger from the table—

And in one swift motion, he dragged it across Rhett’s throat.

The traitor gasped, choking, his eyes wide in shock as blood spilled across the table.

Within moments, he was still.

Whisker grabbed Rhett’s hair, lifting his severed head, and tossed it into a nearby barrel. “Let that be a warning to anyone who thinks they can own us.”

The Black Siren was waiting for them at the docks, her sails catching the ocean wind, her lanterns flickering against the dark waters.

The crew boarded swiftly, leaving the city of Mythwyn behind them.

As the ship pulled away from the harbor, Gerr grinned, tossing a coin in the air. “So, where to next?”

Whisker stood at the helm, watching as Mythwyn faded into the distance.

“Wherever the gold takes us.”

The sea was open, the wind was strong, and the Black Siren sailed toward its next legend.

On the Sea

The Black Siren had been sailing for days, the wind steady but silent, the open sea stretching in all directions. Then, on the seventh day, as the sun dipped low over the horizon, the watch spotted something on the waves—a dark silhouette, drifting aimlessly toward them.

Hobbin squinted from the deck. “That’s no normal ship.”

The vessel was old—its sails tattered, its wooden hull blackened with decay, yet it still floated, moving without direction, without crew, without purpose.

Zili's tail flicked. "A ghost ship?"

Whisker grinned. "There's only one way to find out."

The Black Siren pulled alongside the rotting vessel, the crew tossing grappling hooks over the railing and securing their lines. The air reeked of salt and mildew, the ship's name long faded from the hull.

Ulk adjusted his goggles. "Not a single soul on deck. No bodies. No blood." He ran a hand over the railing, his fingers coming away covered in dark mold. "This ship's been drifting for years."

Gornim cracked his knuckles. "If it's abandoned, that means loot."

Whisker nodded. "Then let's have a look below."

The crew descended the creaking stairs, their boots echoing in the eerie silence.

Then—the air turned ice-cold.

A low, unnatural whisper filled the darkness.

And from the walls of the ship, the shadows moved.

Eight wraiths slid from the wood itself, their hollow eyes burning with spectral fire, their skeletal fingers reaching out as a cold, unnatural wind howled through the corridors.

"Intruders," they whispered, their voices a chorus of the dead. "Your flesh does not belong here."

Then they attacked.

The corridor erupted into chaos as the wraiths descended upon the crew. Whisker rolled back, slashing his cutlass through one wraith's form—but the blade passed through with only a whisper of resistance, the creature barely flinching before clawing at him with spectral talons. He twisted away just in time, feeling a deep chill sink into his bones. Gornim roared, swinging his axe through the air, the enchanted steel burning with faint runes as it cleaved through a wraith's shadowy form. The creature shrieking as part of its essence was torn away.

Zili darted between them, her daggers flashing in the dim light, but each strike barely slowed the wraiths. One lashed out at her—she hissed as its ghostly claw raked across her arm, sapping her strength. Hobbin swung his warhammer, striking the wooden planks hard enough to crack the floorboards, sending one wraith reeling back. "Bloody ghosts! They don't bleed! How the hell do we kill them?!"

Ulk fumbled through his satchel, his eyes wide. "We need magic! They won't die to steel alone!" He grabbed a flask filled with blessed oil, tossing it toward the ground—a burst of

golden light erupted, burning through three of the wraiths, their forms hissing and twisting in agony. Crook, quick on his feet, snatched a torch from the wall, waving it wildly at one of the creatures—fire licking at its form, forcing it to retreat.

“Burn them!” he croaked. “They fear the flame!”

The crew pressed forward, using torches, enchanted weapons, and sheer brute force to drive the wraiths back. One by one, the spectral horrors faded, their agonized wails swallowed by the darkness.

Finally, the last wraith let out a shriek, its form unraveling like mist, leaving nothing behind but the cold silence of the abandoned ship.

The battle was won.

Whisker caught his breath, wiping frost from his fur. “Well. That was unpleasant.”

Ulk knelt beside the remains of the last wraith, examining the wooden planks. “They were bound to this place—probably cursed crewmen. Whatever happened here was bad.”

Gornim grunted. “Bad for them. Good for us. Let’s find out what they left behind.”

The crew pushed deeper into the ship, finally reaching the cargo hold.

Inside, they found dozens of bottles of fine wine, surprisingly untouched by time. Linen and cloth, some of it damp, but still valuable for trade. A locked iron chest, its contents unknown. A collection of rusted weapons, likely from the ship’s lost crew.

Hobbin smirked. “Wine’s still good. Better than what we’ve got on the Siren.”

Gerr tapped the iron chest. “This is the real prize. Let’s crack it open when we’re back on our own deck.”

They loaded up what they could, moving quickly—none of them wanted to stay here any longer than necessary.

As they climbed back onto the Black Siren, the ghost ship drifted onward, fading into the mist, disappearing into the endless ocean.

Zili exhaled. “That thing’s cursed.”

Whisker nodded. “Not our problem anymore.”

They watched the abandoned vessel vanish into the fog. Then, with the loot secured, they turned toward the horizon— And the Black Siren sailed on, toward the next adventure.

The Black Siren rocked violently as the sickening crack of wood against wood shattered the drunken haze of the crew’s wine-soaked evening.

Whisker was the first to move, staggering up the stairs as shouts and steel rang out on deck.

When he emerged into the cold night air, his eyes widened.

Another vessel had rammed them, its splintered prow grinding against their hull. The ship was smaller, but its sails were marked with a red serpent, a sigil Whisker recognized all too well.

The Crimson Reavers.

Twelve brutal pirates had already boarded, their ropes anchored to the Siren's masts, their weapons gleaming in the moonlight.

A bald, scarred man stood at the front, a wicked grin on his face.

"Well, well, well," he sneered. "Looks like we caught ourselves a fat prize."

Whisker spat onto the deck. "Bad luck, mate. You just boarded the wrong damn ship."

Then, the fighting began.

Whisker was fast, his cutlass flashing in the moonlight, but the bald pirate was faster—his brass-knuckled fist slammed into Whisker's jaw, sending the ratfolk reeling backward, his vision blurring. Zili danced between two enemies, dodging and weaving, her daggers slicing throats and bellies—until a whip lashed out from the darkness, curling around her ankle. With a savage yank, she was ripped off her feet, crashing hard against the deck.

Gerr moved like a shadow, striking from the side—until a massive brute grabbed him by the collar and threw him into the mast, his back slamming against the wood with a sickening crack. Hobbin was a wall of fury, his hammer smashing skulls, but a lean pirate slipped past his guard, slashing deep across his leg. The dwarf grunted, blood pouring down his boot. Crook fought viciously, his blade slicing tendons, until a pirate grabbed him by the throat and hurled him overboard. His croaking scream was swallowed by the crashing waves.

"CROOK!" Hobbin roared, but there was no time to save him—more pirates pressed in.

The deck became a slaughterhouse.

The smell of blood filled the air.

But the Black Siren's crew didn't die easy.

Whisker, half-conscious, saw the bald pirate raising his blade for a killing blow. With the last of his strength, he drove his dagger into the man's ribs, twisting hard. The pirate's eyes bulged before he collapsed. Zili, still tangled in the whip, yanked it hard, pulling her attacker off balance before sinking both daggers into his throat.

Gornim tore through the remaining men, his axe carving through flesh and bone, his roars echoing across the sea. Hobbin, bleeding but furious, swung his hammer at the pirate who had cut him—sending the man's skull shattering like an egg. Gerr, grinning despite his bruised ribs, drove a blade into the brute who had thrown him, whispering, "That one's for my back, mate."

One by one, the Crimson Reavers fell.

And soon, the deck was silent once more.

Hobbin limped to the railing. “Where’s Crook?”

A splash came from the side of the ship. Moments later, a soaked and furious Crook climbed up the ropes, his dagger still clenched between his teeth.

“Next bastard that throws me overboard gets drowned,” he growled, shaking off the seawater.

Whisker wiped blood from his mouth. “Let’s see what these bastards had worth taking.”

They crossed over to the enemy ship, searching its captain’s chambers and cargo hold.

Their rewards were a chest of 250 gold coins, tucked away in a hidden compartment beneath the captain’s bed. A handful of silver signet rings, likely stolen from wealthy merchants. A ruby the size of a thumb, gleaming in the lantern light. Crates of salted pork, hardtack, and barrels of beer.

Gornim smirked, lifting one of the beer casks. “At least they had good taste.”

With their enemies dead, their loot secured, and a new ship under their command, the crew made their next decision.

Whisker, still sore, took the helm of the captured vessel. “I’ll sail this one. You lot get the Siren ready to move.”

Hobbin spat overboard. “We sailing straight to Varondale?”

Whisker grinned. “Aye. Let’s see what fortune waits for us there.”

With two ships now under their banner, the Black Siren’s crew turned toward the distant port, their holds heavy with gold, their thirst for adventure far from satisfied.

Varondale

After a week at sea, the Black Siren and her newly captured vessel sailed into the bustling harbor of Varondale—a rich coastal city known for its booming trade, sprawling market squares, and sprawling taverns that never closed.

The crew secured both ships at the docks, their boots hitting solid ground for the first time in days.

Whisker stretched, cracking his neck. “Right. First order of business—let’s sell that damn ship.”

Hobbin nodded. “Aye, but not to the first fool waving coin. Let’s find someone willing to pay what it’s worth.”

The crew headed into the market, weaving through stalls of spices, exotic silks, and crates of strange goods from across the world.

They spent a few hours asking around, looking for wealthy merchants or shipowners who might want a seaworthy vessel—even if it had belonged to pirates.

Eventually, they caught the attention of a plump, finely dressed merchant with rings on every finger and a sharp glint in his eyes.

“You claim to have a ship for sale?” he asked, adjusting his velvet coat.

Whisker smirked. “A fine vessel. Strong hull, good sails. Needs a bit of love, but she’ll make you rich.”

The merchant stroked his chin. “Show me.”

They led him back to the docks, where the captured pirate vessel bobbed gently in the water.

The merchant’s eyes gleamed. “Not bad.” He ran a hand across the railings, nodding in approval. “How much?”

Hobbin crossed his arms. “We won’t part with her for less than 3,500 gold.”

The merchant scoffed. “You overestimate her worth, friend. I’ll give you 2,000.”

Gornim grunted. “You overestimate your ability to walk out of here in one piece.”

The merchant chuckled, unfazed. “2,500.”

Whisker grinned. “3,000. Final price.”

The merchant sighed dramatically, but the greed in his eyes was clear.

“Fine. 3,000 it is.” He signaled for his men to bring the gold.

Moments later, the Black Siren’s crew stood heavier with coin, their pouches filled with shining gold pieces as they watched the merchant’s men prepare the ship for departure.

Gerr tossed a gold coin in the air, catching it with a grin. “I like Varondale already.”

Hobbin smirked. “Then let’s go celebrate.”

The Sleeping Fox was one of Varondale’s finest taverns, known for its strong ale, rigged gambling tables, and ‘entertainment’ for those willing to pay extra.

The crew stepped inside, the scent of roasted meat and pipe smoke filling their lungs.

Hobbin slammed a few gold coins onto the counter. “Ale for the lot of us!”

The barkeep, a one-eyed man with a thick mustache, grinned. “Coming right up.”

They drank freely, laughing over old stories and past victories.

Whisker found himself at the gambling table, playing a game of dice against a broad-shouldered orc with a chipped tusk and a nasty grin.

The bets grew higher.

Then Whisker noticed the orc’s hands moving too fast—the dice shifting in ways they shouldn’t.

The ratfolk’s tail flicked. “You’re cheating.”

The orc snorted. “You’re losing.”

Whisker smirked. “Am I?”

With a swift motion, he grabbed the orc’s wrist, flipping his hand to reveal a pair of rigged dice.

The table went silent.

Then—the orc swung.

His massive fist crashed into Whisker’s jaw, sending him stumbling back over the table.

The crew jumped to their feet.

Gornim grabbed a chair and smashed it over the orc’s back.

Zili leapt forward, tackling another gambler who had drawn a dagger.

Hobbin swung his mug like a hammer, smashing it into a drunk who got too close.

The tavern exploded into chaos, fists and bottles flying.

Finally, the barkeep fired a crossbow into the ceiling, shouting. “ENOUGH!”

The brawl slowly ended, bruised gamblers cursing and limping away.

Whisker wiped blood from his mouth, grinning. “Well, that was fun.”

After the fight, the crew feasted on roasted lamb, buttered potatoes, and warm bread, drinking until their limbs were heavy.

As the night deepened, the tavern's owner offered heated baths and courtesans for those willing to pay.

Crook grinned, tossing a few coins onto the counter. "I could use both."

The courtesan took one look at Crook, wrinkled her nose, and stepped back. "I'm not bedding a frog."

Whisker laughed. "Guess I'm out too, then?"

The courtesan crossed her arms. "I don't do rats either."

Hobbin chuckled. "What about for double?"

The courtesan hesitated—then pocketed the gold.

Whisker smirked. “That’s what I thought.”

The crew spent the night in comfort, some enjoying warm beds, others drifting into a deep, drunken sleep.

Tomorrow, they would decide their next move. But for tonight, the Black Siren’s crew lived well.

The morning air in Varondale was thick with the scent of salt and city life—a mix of baking bread, burning coal, and the ever-present stink of fish from the docks.

The Black Siren’s crew, still groggy from a night of indulgence, gathered in the common room of the Sleeping Fox Tavern, nursing tankards of watered-down ale and platters of greasy eggs and sausage.

Whisker exhaled, rubbing his temples. “We should’ve stolen that merchant’s wine instead of his gold.”

Zili smirked. “Soft-headed already, captain? I thought ratfolk had stronger livers.”

Before Whisker could retort, the tavern door swung open, and a man stepped inside.

The newcomer was short, round, and impeccably dressed, his rich purple robes trimmed with golden embroidery. He moved with a haughty air, his golden rings clicking as he adjusted the fine silver chain around his neck.

Master Obran Thrynn.

A jeweler of great renown, known for his fine craftsmanship—and his temper.

He scanned the room with sharp eyes before marching straight to the crew’s table.

“You are the sailors from the Black Siren, yes?”

Hobbin set down his mug. “Who’s asking?”

Obran pulled out a chair without invitation, sitting heavily. “I need men of action. Men who don’t ask too many questions.”

Whisker smirked. “You came to the right table.”

Obran nodded, though his expression remained grim. “My latest caravan from the mines never arrived. It was carrying precious gems, fine metals, enough to fund a year’s worth of trade. Gone. Vanished.”

Gornim raised an eyebrow. “Bandits?”

Obran’s lips pressed into a thin line. “Perhaps. But something is wrong. No bodies. No tracks. The escorting guards never returned. It’s as if the entire caravan simply disappeared into the dust.”

He leaned forward, his voice low.

“I have… suspicions. Either my rivals arranged this, or something unnatural is at play.”

The crew exchanged glances.

Ulk wiped grease from his fingers. “What’s the pay?”

Obran exhaled. “Find my goods and bring them back, you’ll earn 800 gold. Find out who’s responsible, and I’ll pay another 500 on top.”

Gerr whistled. “That’s a fair pile of coin.”

Whisker’s tail flicked. “And if we find the caravan but the cargo’s missing?”

Obran’s jaw clenched. “Then I’ll settle for knowing who took it, so I can deal with them myself.”

Hobbin leaned back, cracking his knuckles. “So where do we start?”

Obran slid a folded parchment across the table. “This is the last known route of the caravan.” Left Varondale two weeks ago. Was supposed to reach the city of Rellthorn within five days. Never arrived. A few farmers claim they saw it pass near the Deadwood Plains—but after that, nothing.

“Ask the city guards,” Obran suggested. “They might have taken bribes to look the other way. There’s also a tavern near the southern gate—the Dusty Mule. That place is a rat’s nest of gossip and lowlifes.”

Whisker grinned. “Sounds like my kind of place.”

Obran stood, adjusting his robe. “Find out what happened. I want my shipment back. Or at least, I want revenge.”

With that, he turned and left, disappearing back into the crowded streets of Varondale.

Gornim grunted. “Something about this stinks.”

Ulk nodded. “No bodies. No tracks. That’s not just bandits.”

Whisker smirked, finishing his ale. “Well, boys, looks like we’ve got ourselves a mystery.”

The crew gathered their gear, adjusted their weapons, and stepped into the sunlit streets of Varondale— Ready to follow the trail of the vanished caravan.

The Black Siren’s crew left the Sleeping Fox Tavern, stepping into the sun-drenched chaos of Varondale’s streets. Merchants hawked their wares, sailors staggered out of brothels, and the occasional city guard stood watch, half-asleep against a wall.

The caravan had vanished, and if they were going to find it, they needed answers.

Whisker adjusted his belt. “We’ve got two places to start—bribed guards or drunken gossip.”

Zili cracked her knuckles. “I say we start with the guards. See if they were paid to look the other way.”

Hobbin smirked. “And if they don’t talk, we make ‘em.”

The southern gate of Varondale was bustling with travelers, but the guards stationed there looked bored and uninterested. One of them, a scruffy man with a crooked nose, leaned against a post, chewing on a piece of dried meat.

Whisker strode up, tossing a silver coin in the air. “Busy day?”

The guard’s eyes flicked to the coin, but he said nothing.

Whisker flipped it into his hand, then flicked out another.

The guard straightened. “What’s your business?”

Gornim crossed his arms. “A caravan went missing a few weeks back. Came through here on its way to Rellthorn.”

The guard grunted. “Plenty of caravans come and go. Can’t remember ‘em all.”

Whisker dropped another two silver coins into his palm.

The guard pocketed the money quickly. “Alright. Yeah, I remember it.”

Zili’s eyes narrowed. “And?”

The guard hesitated, then sighed. “They passed through just fine. Big shipment, lot of guards. But I heard later that it never reached Rellthorn.”

“Any trouble on the road?” Ulk asked.

The guard rubbed his jaw. “That’s the strange part. No reports of bandits. No refugees running from an attack. Just… gone.”

Hobbin frowned. “Who was leading it?”

“Captain Gellard,” the guard said. “A hard bastard, not the type to get ambushed easily. If something took him down, it wasn’t bandits.”

“And you didn’t think to investigate?” Crook asked.

The guard snorted. “I don’t get paid enough to chase ghosts.”

Whisker smirked. “Fair enough.” He tossed him another coin. “If you hear anything else, forget we were here.”

The guard nodded quickly, already disappearing back into the crowd.

The Dusty Mule was a low-roofed, smoke-filled den of thieves, mercenaries, and drunkards. The air was thick with the scent of stale ale, and a bard in the corner half-heartedly strummed a lute while men played dice on sticky tables.

The crew stepped inside, drawing more than a few stares.

Whisker grinned, dropping a few gold coins on the bar. “Drinks for anyone with a story to tell about the missing caravan.”

The bartender, a thick-armed woman with a scar across her lip, poured a few tankards and leaned in. “You don’t wanna go looking for that one.”

Hobbin lifted a brow. “Why’s that?”

The bartender glanced around, lowering her voice. “Because the only man who came back from it didn’t last long.”

The crew exchanged glances.

Gerr leaned forward. “Where is he?”

The bartender wiped her hands on her apron. “Dead.”

A pause.

“How?” Whisker asked.

The bartender sighed. “The guards found him a few days after the caravan vanished, wandering near the Deadwood Plains. Said he was raving about shadows moving in the trees. He wouldn’t stop screaming. They put him in a cell to sober up.”

Ulk frowned. “And then?”

The bartender met his gaze. “Next morning, they found him torn apart. Not a mark on the walls. No one heard a thing.”

The room seemed colder.

Zili exhaled. “Well, that’s not unsettling at all.”

Whisker grinned, finishing his drink. “Guess we’re heading to the Deadwood Plains.”

The bartender shook her head. “If you’ve got any sense, you’ll let this one go.”

Whisker grinned wider. “Lucky for us, we don’t have any sense.”

The crew stood, adjusting their weapons.

The vanished caravan wasn't taken by ordinary thieves.

And whatever had taken it… was still out there.

The Black Siren's crew left the city behind, venturing southward toward the Deadwood Plains, where the caravan had last been seen.

The road was long and lonely, the trees growing darker and more twisted the further they went. By the time they reached the outskirts of the plains, the sky was a dull, overcast gray, and the wind carried a strange, whispering hush through the tall, dead grass.

Hobbin grunted, adjusting his belt. "I don't like this place."

Ulk checked his map. "According to the records, the caravan should've come through here. If it was attacked, we'll find signs of it."

Whisker sniffed the air. "Smoke. Old, but still there. Someone burned something here recently."

Zili's tail flicked. "Then let's find out what."

They moved cautiously, weapons ready, until they crested a hill—

And saw the wreckage below.

What was left of the caravan was strewn across the landscape—wagons smashed, crates overturned, metal and wood twisted into unnatural angles.

But there were no bodies.

Gornim frowned. "No blood. No arrows. If it was bandits, where's the fight?"

Crook hopped ahead, poking through the wreckage. "Whoever hit them took everything… but left the wagons?"

Zili crouched beside a charred section of ground, brushing away the ash. "This isn't from torches. This was burned with something unnatural."

Whisker knelt, running a claw over the ground. "And these marks?"

Everyone looked down.

The earth was disturbed—but not by hooves or human feet. Instead, deep, clawed impressions dug into the dirt, as if something massive had moved through here.

Hobbin exhaled. "No normal bandits did this."

Ulk stood, his face pale. "No. They didn't."

Then—

The whispers returned.

Low, unnatural, crawling into their minds like cold fingers pressing against their skulls.

And from the shadows of the dead trees, something moved.

Eight figures emerged, draped in tattered robes, their faces hidden behind rusted masks. Each carried weapons that gleamed with unnatural black metal.

And their leader, taller than the rest, spoke in a voice like grinding stone:

“You should not have come here.”

The crew reached for their weapons.

The true danger behind the vanished caravan was finally revealing itself.

The Black Siren’s crew stood at the wreckage of the vanished caravan, their hands tight on their weapons, their breath misting in the cold air.

The eight figures in tattered robes and rusted masks stepped closer, their movements unnatural and silent, as if the earth itself did not dare to make a sound beneath them.

The leader’s voice scraped through the still air:

“You should not have come here.”

Whisker bared his teeth. “We’ll go where we damn well please.”

The cultists did not react. One tilted its head slightly, the metal of its mask catching the dying light.

Then, with eerie unity, they drew their weapons—long, jagged blades, dripping with black ichor.

Hobbin spat. “I’ve had enough of creepy bastards whispering at me. Let’s gut ‘em.”

And then the fight began.

Whisker lunged first, his cutlass flashing, but when he slashed at the nearest cultist, his blade sank into their robe like cutting into a wet carcass—the flesh underneath was wrong, shifting beneath the steel like it didn’t belong. Zili darted low, knives aimed for throats, but when she struck, the cultist didn’t scream—it just laughed, a choked, wheezing sound.

Gornim roared, bringing his axe down, cleaving a cultist in two—only for its body to writhe, black tendrils stitching it back together. Hobbin swung his hammer, the blunt force crushing ribs, but the thing didn’t fall—instead, it grabbed his wrist, its grip like ice, and whispered words that made his vision blur. Ulk fumbled through his satchel, grabbing a flask of alchemist’s fire—he hurled it at one of the cultists, and the moment flames engulfed the figure, it screamed in agony, the fire burning it unnaturally fast.

Crook’s eyes widened. “They burn!”

Whisker grinned. “Then let’s set the whole damned place on fire.”

The crew changed tactics—instead of cutting and slashing, they used fire, torches, and oil, setting the dry grass of the Deadwood Plains ablaze.

The cultists howled, their robes igniting, their twisted flesh writhing in the flames.

The leader snarled, stepping forward, raising a hand—and the shadows deepened, as if the sun itself had retreated.

“The Maw comes,” it whispered.

Then, from the wreckage of the caravan, something stirred.

A deep, wet, slithering sound filled the air.

Something was beneath the earth.

Something was waking up.

The cult leader’s whisper carried through the air like a sickness, crawling into their ears and settling in their bones. The shadows stretched unnaturally across the charred remains of the caravan, the flames flickering as if struggling against an unseen force. The ground trembled beneath them, a deep, wet slithering noise rising from beneath the earth.

Whisker wiped the blood from his muzzle and stepped back, his tail flicking in unease. "That doesn’t sound like a man-made problem," he muttered.

Hobbin, breathing heavily from exertion, slammed his hammer against the ground in frustration. "I knew this smelled like a gods-damned curse!" he barked. "Why is it never just bandits?"

The last surviving cultists burned and shrieked as the flames took them, but their leader remained standing, untouched by the fire licking at his feet. His rusted mask gleamed in the dying light, and his voice dripped with reverence as he spoke.

"The Maw is hungry," he intoned. "You will be its first offering."

A fissure split open in the ground behind him, dark and yawning, the earth pulling apart like rotting flesh. From the gaping wound came a deep, wet gasp, as though the earth itself had inhaled. A grotesque limb, thick and glistening with black ichor, slithered from the depths, its surface writhing with shifting mouths that opened and closed, whispering nonsense words in a language older than the stones beneath their feet.

Ulk stumbled backward, eyes wide. "That is not natural," he hissed.

Gornim spat on the ground, his grip tightening on his axe. "Then we kill it before it decides we’re a fine meal."

The cult leader tilted his head in amusement, then took a step forward. His shadow stretched unnaturally long, rising like a living thing. With no hesitation, he plunged a rusted dagger into his own chest, twisting it as he fell to his knees. Black ichor oozed from the wound, and his body convulsed violently before the shadows swallowed him whole. His last words came as a breathless whisper.

"The Maw is awake."

The thing in the pit surged forward.

The crew braced for the worst.

The ground convulsed, spewing chunks of earth and shattered wood into the air as the monstrous limb dragged itself from the fissure. More appendages slithered up from the abyss, each coated in black ichor, their slick flesh lined with writhing mouths that gnashed and whispered in voices not meant for mortal ears. The stench that followed was unbearable—a mixture of rotting meat and something far worse, something ancient.

Whisker bared his teeth, gripping his cutlass so tightly his knuckles ached. "I don't suppose running is an option?"

Hobbin slammed his hammer against his shield, his voice thick with fury. "If we don't kill it now, it'll just follow us to the next village! Stand your ground!"

The thing in the pit lunged. A massive, pulsating tendril lashed toward them, and Zili barely managed to twist out of the way before it smashed into the ground where she had stood, splintering the earth like brittle glass.

Gornim roared, hefting his axe overhead and bringing it down on one of the monstrous limbs. His blade cleaved through the slick flesh, sending a spray of thick, inky ichor onto the ground. The severed chunk writhed, its many mouths screaming in agony before it shriveled and crumbled into ash.

Ulk yanked a flask of alchemist's fire from his belt and hurled it into the gaping maw of one of the writhing limbs. Flames erupted from within, and the creature let out a piercing wail that sent waves of pain through their skulls.

Crook, still soaked from his earlier scuffle, leapt onto a half-broken wagon, using his powerful legs to propel himself high into the air. With a precise flick of his wrist, he sent a dagger flying into one of the creature's gaping mouths. It bit down on the blade, snapping it in half, but the act sent it reeling backward in fury.

Whisker took the opportunity. With a snarl, he surged forward, cutlass flashing as he carved through the tendrils reaching for him. "This thing dies *now*!"

The creature shrieked as flames and steel bit into it. The fissure beneath it cracked and widened, the darkness within pulsating as if the thing was *trying* to pull itself free—but something was holding it back, something unseen. The ritual had been incomplete. Without the cult leader's full sacrifice, the Maw was not at full strength.

Hobbin saw it too. "It's *weak*!" he roared. "Push it back!"

The crew fought with everything they had, hacking, burning, and smashing the beast into retreat. It howled as another wave of fire spread across its shifting form, and slowly—agonizingly—it began to descend, its limbs clawing at the dirt as the fissure started to close.

One final mouth, lined with jagged, broken teeth, snapped at Whisker as it went under. He dodged just in time, but as the beast sank into the abyss, a single word slithered into his mind, whispered in a voice that was neither male nor female.

"Next time, I will not be alone."

And then the earth *sealed shut*, leaving behind only scorched land, broken wagons, and the eerie silence of a battlefield that should never have been.

The crew stood still, panting, their bodies aching from battle.

Gerr let out a short, bitter laugh. "That was *not* worth 800 gold."

Ulk, still gripping the remnants of his last alchemical flask, wiped the sweat from his brow. "We need to tell Obran what really happened. This was no normal robbery."

Whisker sheathed his cutlass, taking a long breath. "We will. But first—" He glanced at the ruined wagons, where bits of treasure and metal still gleamed beneath the wreckage. "Let's see what's left to claim."

They had fought a nightmare and won. But deep beneath the earth, in places where the sun had never touched, something had *noticed them*.

And it would not forget.

Hobbin grunted, adjusting his grip on his hammer. "Aye. If we don't come back with *something*, that fancy bastard Obran will think we drank his gold away."

The crew spread out, picking through the ruins, kicking aside burnt wood and overturned crates in search of anything salvageable.

Gornim heaved open a half-crushed chest, his axe prying the lid loose with a loud crack. Inside, bundles of velvet pouches spilled out, each one holding small gems and raw ores from the mines—not as much as they had hoped, but enough to fetch a price.

Zili crouched beside a splintered cartwheel, her claws brushing over a silver pendant, its chain snapped, but its gemstone still gleaming in the dull light. She rolled it between her fingers, her eyes narrowing. "This didn't come from a mine. This is nobility's work."

Gerr, ever the opportunist, was already rummaging through the pockets of a long-dead guard, his dagger flicking over the man's leather vest as he pulled free a handful of coins and an engraved signet ring. He grinned, tossing the ring in the air before catching it. "This poor bastard's loss is our gain."

Ulk, meanwhile, had found something far more unsettling.

He crouched near a burned section of ground, his fingers brushing over what looked like a scroll case, its leather charred but still intact. With a practiced motion, he popped it open, revealing a partially burnt parchment within. As his eyes scanned the remaining words, his expression darkened.

"This wasn't just a gem shipment," he muttered. "The caravan was also carrying *something else*—a sealed artifact bound for the city's arcane archives."

Whisker turned, ears twitching. "Define 'artifact.'"

Ulk shook his head. "The paper's too burned to read most of it, but whatever it was, it was meant to be locked away. Someone *knew* it was on this caravan." He hesitated. "The Maw's cult wasn't just feeding their god. I think they were *summoning it for this*."

Silence hung between them.

Hobbin exhaled through his nose. "So, let me get this straight—we *just* fought off a nightmare from the deep, and now you're telling me that *something else* might have its claws in this mess?"

Whisker sighed, rubbing his temples. "Why is it never just an easy job?"

Crook hopped onto an overturned barrel, arms crossed. "So, what now? Take what we can carry and go get paid?"

Whisker glanced toward the ruined road ahead, where the trail led back to Varondale. His instincts told him there was more to this than just a missing caravan.

But for now, gold was gold.

"Pack up what we can salvage," he said. "Obran gets his gems. We get paid. And after that…" His tail flicked, his sharp grin returning. "Then we decide if we're done with this mess or if we *really* want to dig deeper."

With their loot gathered, the crew turned back toward the city, leaving behind the charred wreckage of a battle they had barely survived.

Behind them, the ground where the Maw had emerged remained blackened, its mark forever seared into the land.

And far, far below, something stirred.

The journey back to Varondale was long and tense. The Deadwood Plains felt quieter than before, as if the land itself had recoiled from the battle they had fought. The burnt fissure where the Maw had emerged still smoldered, its unnatural wound sealed for now—but the crew knew better than to believe it was truly gone.

For hours, they traveled in relative silence, each of them turning over the events in their minds.

Hobbin limped beside Whisker, muttering under his breath. “That thing… It wasn’t just a beast. It was thinking. Watching.”

Whisker flicked his tail. “And next time, it’ll be waiting.”

The thought did not sit well with any of them.

By nightfall, the glow of Varondale’s lanterns shimmered in the distance, the scent of salt air and city life replacing the eerie stillness of the plains.

It was a relief to return to crowded streets, noisy markets, and the promise of warm food and strong drink.

But they still had business to finish.

The crew marched straight to Obran Thrynn’s estate, a lavish home perched atop the merchant district, its stone walls gleaming in the torchlight. The moment they arrived, two armed guards blocked their path.

“Business with Master Thrynn?” one asked.

Whisker grinned. “Tell him the men who found his caravan are here.”

The guards exchanged a glance before stepping aside. They knew better than to make a rich man wait for his missing fortune.

Inside, they were led to Obran’s private hall, where the merchant sat behind a massive oak desk, counting coins under the dim glow of candlelight. His golden rings clicked against each other as he ran them over a ledger, but as soon as he saw them, he set his quill down.

“You found my shipment?” His tone was sharp, expectant.

Hobbin tossed a velvet pouch onto the table. The weight of gems and ore spilled out, catching the candlelight.

Obran’s eyes flicked over the treasure, his fingers drumming against the desk. “Not all of it.”

Zili crossed her arms. “Most of it’s gone. And so are your men.”

Obran’s expression darkened. “Gone how?”

Whisker took a seat—without invitation—leaning forward. “Your caravan didn’t just get hit by bandits. We found it in the Deadwood Plains, torn to pieces. And the thing that did it wasn’t human.”

The merchant’s fingers stopped drumming. “Explain.”

Ulk pulled out the burned parchment he had salvaged and laid it before Obran. “Your shipment included *something else*, something bound for the city’s arcane archives. We think someone knew about it and wanted it taken.”

Obran’s jaw tightened. “I was *never* informed of any such artifact.”

Gornim scoffed. “Well, someone knew.”

Obran exhaled through his nose, studying the half-burned document before leaning back in his chair. “So my men were slaughtered over something I never even agreed to transport.” He shook his head. “You’re right about one thing—this was no ordinary robbery.”

He gestured to one of his servants, who immediately left the room. Moments later, a heavy chest was brought forth and placed on the table.

Obran flicked open the lid, revealing gold stacked in neat rows, shimmering under the candlelight.

“Your payment,” he said. “Eight hundred for the recovered shipment, another five hundred for the truth of what happened. You’ve earned it.”

Whisker nodded, pleased. “Glad we understand each other.”

Obran, however, did not look pleased. His sharp gaze lingered on the burnt parchment. “I’ll have my own men look into this. If someone played me for a fool, I’ll see them ruined.”

Zili smirked. “Just make sure whatever that thing was stays buried. I don’t fancy round two.”

Obran nodded, dismissing them with a flick of his hand. “Enjoy your gold, gentlemen. And if you hear anything else about my *lost cargo*, I expect you to bring it to me first.”

Without another word, the crew took their well-earned payment and left.

With their pouches heavy with gold, the crew did what they did best—celebrate.

They returned to The Sleeping Fox, ordering pitchers of ale, roasted meats, and warm bread, laughing over the madness they had survived.

Hobbin raised his mug, the foam spilling over the sides. “To never dealing with monsters again!”

The table erupted in laughter, but Whisker just smirked over his drink.

Because he knew the truth.

The Maw wasn’t done with them.

And somewhere out there, someone still had the artifact that had set this all in motion.

But for now, the crew drank deep, the warmth of gold in their pockets and the thrill of a fight won still fresh in their blood.

The Sleeping Fox Tavern was alive with noise. The scent of roasted meat and ale filled the air, and the Black Siren's crew sat around a sturdy wooden table, gold stacked in neat little piles before them. They had earned it—a hard fight, a job well done, and a purse full of coin.

Hobbin tore into a chunk of lamb, grease dripping down his beard as he grinned. "Now that's how you do business! No ghosts, no curses, just gold in our hands."

Whisker leaned back, rolling a gold coin between his fingers. "I wouldn't celebrate too soon."

Gerr smirked. "Why not? We got paid, we got food, and best of all, we ain't dead."

Whisker's tail flicked against the chair. "Because jobs like this don't end when the coin hits your palm. You all saw what we fought out there. Whatever that thing was, someone wanted it loose. And if that artifact was important enough to die for, someone's still looking for it."

A silence fell over the table, just for a moment. The weight of the Maw's whispers still clung to them, even if none of them wanted to admit it.

Zili took a long sip of ale, then wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "So what? We start digging? Poking our heads where they don't belong?"

Whisker grinned, sharp and knowing. "We do what we do best. We find out who's paying the most—and we take their gold before anyone else does."

Hobbin let out a deep laugh. "Now that's more like it."

But before the night could turn into another celebration, a figure approached their table.

A man in a hooded cloak, moving too smoothly, too quietly, slipping through the tavern like a shadow.

The crew tensed, hands drifting toward weapons as the stranger pulled up a chair and sat without invitation.

His voice was low, calm, but edged with something cold.

"You should have let the caravan stay forgotten."

Whisker's grin widened. "And who might you be?"

The stranger slowly removed his hood, revealing sharp features, dark hair streaked with silver, and piercing violet eyes that seemed to see right through them.

"Someone who knows what you've taken," he said. "And someone who can offer you far more than Obran Thrynn ever could."

He reached into his cloak and placed a small, black iron coin on the table.

It was cold enough that frost spread across the wood beneath it.

The crew exchanged glances.

The Sleeping Fox Tavern, once loud with laughter and the clinking of mugs, seemed to quiet as the stranger's black iron coin rested on the table. The cold it gave off wasn't natural—the wood beneath it frosted over, tiny crystals of ice forming along the grain.

Whisker leaned forward, studying the man carefully. His violet eyes were unreadable, his face calm, but there was a weight to his presence—like someone who had walked through places best left forgotten.

Hobbin eyed the coin, then reached toward it—only for Zili to grab his wrist.

"Don't touch it," she said, voice low.

Hobbin scowled. "It's just a damn coin."

The stranger smiled. "It's far more than that."

Ulk, ever the one to recognize trouble wrapped in expensive cloaks, leaned forward. "Alright, friend, let's not dance around it. You clearly know something we don't. So why don't you tell us what exactly we've taken?"

The stranger tapped the table once with a gloved finger, tilting his head slightly. "You retrieved something from the wreckage of that caravan, did you not? A piece of parchment, burned but not destroyed?"

The crew exchanged quick glances.

Gornim grunted. "What of it?"

The man's smile didn't quite reach his eyes. "That parchment was a ledger. A record of what was being transported that day. And if you read between the ashes, you'd know it spoke of something far older than mere gold or gems."

Whisker flicked his tail, watching him closely. "And let me guess—you want it."

The stranger inclined his head. "I do. And I'm willing to pay handsomely for it."

Gerr scoffed. "How handsomely?"

With a slow, deliberate motion, the stranger reached into his cloak and placed a small leather pouch onto the table. When it hit the wood, the sound was unmistakable—platinum.

Ulk let out a low whistle. "That's enough to keep a crew fat and happy for a long time."

Hobbin narrowed his eyes. "Too much for just a burnt scrap of paper."

The stranger met his gaze. “Because it’s not about the paper. It’s about what it leads to.”

The air around them seemed to tighten, as if the tavern itself was listening.

Zili leaned forward, voice careful. “And what exactly does it lead to?”

The stranger smiled again, that cold, knowing smile.

“To something that should have never been found.”

The crew sat in silence, weighing the offer. The platinum glimmered, the iron coin still radiated its unnatural chill, and Whisker could feel the shift in the air—the kind of shift that meant they were standing at the edge of something big, dangerous, and very profitable.

Finally, Whisker picked up the pouch of platinum, tossing it once in his palm before tucking it into his belt.

“Alright, stranger,” he said. “Let’s talk.”

The black iron coin still sat on the table, its unnatural chill spreading slowly across the wood. The stranger’s violet eyes watched the crew carefully, measuring their reactions, waiting for their answer.

Whisker rolled the pouch of platinum in his palm, feeling the weight of the coin, the weight of the deal hanging in the air. Gold was gold, but this? This felt like something else entirely.

Hobbin folded his arms, his gaze hard. “Before we start selling scraps of paper, we want to know exactly what we’re dealing with.”

The stranger inclined his head slightly. “That’s fair.”

He reached into his cloak again, pulling free a folded parchment of his own—one that looked far older than the burned ledger they had recovered. With a flick of his wrist, he placed it next to the iron coin, spreading it open just enough for the crew to see.

The writing was ancient, written in black ink that hadn’t faded despite its age. Along the edges, symbols had been carefully carved, forming a pattern of circles and jagged lines.

Ulk, ever the scholar, leaned in. “This isn’t just a trade record…” His brow furrowed as he ran a gloved hand along the markings. “These are binding sigils.”

The stranger nodded. “Good. You’re quicker than most.” He turned his gaze toward Whisker. “Your parchment and mine are part of the same story. Someone transported *something* in that caravan—something bound. And someone else made sure it never reached its destination.”

Whisker drummed his claws against the table. “You’re talking about the thing we fought in the Deadwood Plains.”

A pause. Then the stranger gave a slow, deliberate nod. “Yes.”

The table fell into an uneasy silence.

Gerr exhaled sharply. “Right. I don’t like this anymore.”

Crook tilted his head. “We already killed the thing. What’s left to talk about?”

The stranger’s expression darkened. “You didn’t kill it. You only *delayed* it.” He tapped the parchment with one finger. “The artifact that was being transported—it was supposed to keep the Maw bound. Without it, it’s only a matter of time before it finds another way to rise.”

Zili scoffed. “So what? You want us to finish someone else’s job? Not our problem.”

The stranger gave her a long, unreadable look before answering. “Perhaps not. But I’m willing to make it *your* problem—for the right price.”

Hobbin let out a humorless laugh. “Of course you are.”

Whisker sat back, studying him. “And what exactly is the *right* price?”

The stranger folded his hands neatly in front of him. “I have another job for you. Find the missing artifact. Recover it before someone else does. And if you do…” He gestured toward the pouch of platinum. “That is just the start.”

The offer hung in the air, thick as the smoke curling from the tavern’s lanterns.

Whisker exchanged glances with his crew. They were pirates, smugglers, mercenaries—not heroes. But something about this felt… unfinished.

And unfinished business had a way of coming back to haunt you.

Whisker’s tail flicked. Finally, he smirked, tapping the table. “Alright, stranger. Tell us where to start.”

The man’s smile was slow and knowing.

“There’s a temple,” he said. “A ruin in the jungle, far from here. That’s where the answers lie.”

The crew sat in silence, the weight of the next job already pressing against them.

They had gold in their pockets and trouble on the horizon.

Again.

The Sleeping Fox Tavern was loud with the sounds of revelry, but at the Black Siren’s table, the air hung heavy with unseen weight. Gold had been offered, secrets had been spilled, and now a choice had to be made.

Whisker tapped his claws against the wooden table, studying the stranger. His violet eyes held no fear, no nervousness—just cold patience, like a man who already knew what would happen next.

Zili exhaled, shaking her head. “A jungle ruin? You’re serious?”

The stranger smiled faintly. “As serious as the thing you buried beneath the Deadwood Plains.”

Gerr leaned back, flipping a dagger in his palm. “And this artifact—whatever it is—it’s still there?”

The man nodded. “It was hidden long ago, protected, locked away in a place no sane man would seek it. But now the ones who *want* it are drawing closer.” His fingers curled around the black iron coin still resting on the table. “Which is why we need to move first.”

Hobbin scoffed. “So you *say*. For all we know, you’re just throwing ghost stories at us to see if we’re dumb enough to chase them.”

The stranger lifted a brow. “You think the Maw was a ghost story?”

Silence settled over the table.

The memory of the thing that had risen from the pit was still fresh—the writhing limbs, the whispering mouths, the bone-deep terror of something that should not have been.

Ulk cleared his throat. “Let’s say we *are* interested. What exactly are we looking for?”

The man sat back, his gloved fingers steepling. “The artifact is called The Obsidian Seal. It was made to do one thing—bind the Maw in its prison. If we don’t recover it, the Maw *will* find another way to rise.”

Whisker flicked his tail, considering the weight of the words. This was more than gold and old ruins. This was power.

And power always had a buyer.

He smirked. “Fine. We’ll take the job.”

The stranger gave a slow, satisfied nod.

“Then you’ll need a map.”

From his coat, he pulled a rolled parchment, placing it carefully onto the table.

The crew leaned in as Whisker unfurled it, revealing a faded map, marked with symbols and runes, its ink old but still legible.

At the very center of the jungle was a single word.

Ith-Kazir.

The name felt wrong in the mouth, like something that shouldn't be spoken.

Crook eyed it warily. "That place *sounds* cursed."

The stranger chuckled. "That's because it is."

Whisker grinned, rolling the map back up. "Sounds like our kind of place."

He tucked it into his coat, then lifted his tankard of ale. "To Ith-Kazir, then."

The crew exchanged looks, then raised their drinks with him.

They had gold, they had a destination, and they had trouble waiting for them at the end of it.

Just another day for the Black Siren's crew.

The next morning, the Black Siren's crew stood on the docks of Varondale, the scent of salt and fish heavy in the air. Seagulls shrieked overhead, and the tide lapped lazily against the wooden piers. Their ship waited, sails furled, ropes secured, ready for the long voyage ahead.

Whisker stood at the helm, unfurling the ancient map the stranger had given them. The name Ith-Kazir still sent a ripple of unease through him, but gold was gold, and they had already set their course.

Hobbin squinted at the map over his shoulder. "A jungle ruin, eh? I hope you lot enjoy heat, bugs, and gods-know-what crawling out of the mud to kill us."

Gerr smirked. "Better than a cursed wasteland full of whispering horrors."

Crook croaked from where he perched on a crate. "I like swamps."

Zili adjusted her belt, checking the edges of her throwing knives. "Doesn't matter what we like. We've got a job. Let's get to it."

Ulk was already studying the sky, measuring the wind. "We'll need to cut across open waters for a few days, then follow the coast south. If the maps are right, the jungle should be past the old trade routes."

Whisker nodded. "Then let's set sail."

With a shout from Gornim, the crew moved into action, hauling ropes, loosening sails, and preparing to leave port.

The Black Siren groaned as the wind caught her sails, and slowly, the ship pulled away from Varondale, leaving the safety of the city behind.

Ahead lay uncharted waters, a land long abandoned, and secrets better left buried.

But fortune favors the bold, and the Black Siren's crew was nothing if not bold.

The jungle awaited.

And with it, whatever lay sleeping beneath Ith-Kazir.

The Black Siren cut through the open waters, its sails stretched tight against the wind. For three days, the journey had been uneventful—clear skies, steady winds, and enough ale to keep the crew in good spirits. But as they ventured further south, the air began to change.

The sky darkened. The wind grew restless. The sea, once calm, churned with an uneasy rhythm.

Whisker stood at the helm, his keen eyes fixed on the horizon. Dark clouds gathered in the distance, their edges tinged with a sickly green glow. The storm wasn't natural. He could *feel* it.

Ulk had been watching too, his small fingers clutching the railing as he studied the shifting patterns in the sky. "That's no ordinary squall."

Hobbin grunted, securing a length of rope. "Course it ain't. Nothing ever is with us."

Zili ran her claws along the edge of her cutlass. "Think it's magic?"

Whisker's tail flicked. "Could be." His gaze drifted toward the ancient map tucked in his coat. They were getting closer to Ith-Kazir.

And someone—or *something*—clearly didn't want them to arrive.

Gornim stomped across the deck, his axe slung over his back. "Whatever it is, we're sailing through it. No turning back now."

The wind howled in agreement, and the first raindrops began to fall.

As the crew rushed to secure the rigging, a deep, guttural sound rolled across the ocean—not thunder, but something far worse.

From beneath the waves, something stirred.

The storm wasn't their only enemy.

The Black Siren rocked violently as the storm crashed down upon it. Rain fell in thick sheets, hammering the deck, turning the wood slick beneath the crew's boots. The wind howled through the rigging, and the sky above churned, green lightning crackling across the black clouds.

Whisker gripped the wheel, his fur soaked through, his cutlass strapped tight to his belt. "Hold her steady!" he bellowed over the storm, his voice nearly swallowed by the deafening roar of the wind.

Zili clung to the rigging, tightening the knots as the ship lurched to the side. “This storm ain’t natural!” she shouted.

Ulk wiped rain from his goggles, scanning the dark waters. “Something’s *moving* beneath us!”

A deep, resonant *boom* echoed from below, a sound so massive it vibrated in their chests.

Then, the sea began to rise.

From the depths, a colossal shape emerged—a mass of writhing tendrils, each one as thick as a ship’s mast, rising from the waves like serpents seeking prey. Water cascaded from its form, revealing slimy, dark-green flesh, covered in pulsating, bioluminescent patterns that flickered in the storm’s eerie glow.

Gerr’s eyes widened. “Gods *damn* me.”

One of the tentacles lashed forward, smashing against the main mast, cracking the wood. The ship lurched, throwing Crook off balance—he barely caught hold of a rope before he was swept overboard.

Hobbin drew his hammer. “Right! We cutting the damn thing loose or sending it back to the abyss?”

Gornim had already made up his mind. With a roar, he swung his axe at the nearest tendril, slicing deep, sending a spray of thick, black ichor across the deck. The beast let out a deep, rumbling growl, so low it rattled their bones.

Whisker bared his teeth. “We *kill* it.”

Lightning split the sky, illuminating the horror that had risen from the deep.

The battle for the Black Siren had begun.

The Black Siren pitched violently as the sea-beast coiled its massive, writhing tendrils around the ship’s hull. The wood groaned under the pressure, the deck slick with rain and the thick black ichor that poured from the wounds Gornim’s axe had carved.

Whisker held the wheel with all his strength, trying to keep the ship from being dragged under. “*Cut the damn thing loose!*” he roared.

A second tentacle lashed out, slamming into the deck, splintering the wood. Gerr barely leapt aside before the impact sent a spray of debris into the air.

Zili moved fast, twin daggers flashing in the stormlight, stabbing into one of the smaller appendages as it slithered toward the mast. “It’s not letting go!” she growled.

Ulk had already reached into his satchel, fumbling for a flask of alchemist’s fire. “Then we *burn it!*”

With a swift motion, he hurled the glass bottle toward the beast's center mass—it shattered against its slick, pulsating flesh, igniting in a burst of sickly green fire.

The creature shrieked, a deep, bone-rattling sound that vibrated through the ship.

Hobbin seized the moment, raising his hammer high before bringing it down onto the nearest tentacle, the impact sending a sickening crunch through the air. "You picked the wrong gods-damned ship, you ugly bastard!"

The beast reeled, tendrils thrashing wildly, sending barrels and rigging flying across the deck. One massive coil wrapped itself around the main mast, squeezing—the wood groaned, cracks spidering through its length.

Whisker saw it immediately. If the mast snapped, the Siren was finished.

He let go of the wheel and dashed through the chaos, rain pelting his fur, his cutlass gleaming with seawater and blood. With a snarl, he leapt onto the thrashing limb, climbing up its slick, undulating surface before driving his blade deep into the beast's flesh.

The monster howled, its grip faltering—

And in that moment, Gornim and Hobbin swung their weapons in unison, severing the coiling mass from the mast.

The tentacle collapsed, spurting ichor, the beast screeching in agony as it began to slip back beneath the waves.

Crook, gripping the rigging with one hand, threw a harpoon straight into the monster's single, bulging eye.

The creature convulsed, its death wail shaking the storm, before finally, with one last violent shudder, it descended back into the abyss.

The ocean was still again, save for the howling storm. The crew stood panting, weapons dripping, the deck a mess of broken wood, tangled ropes, and steaming black blood.

Whisker wiped his blade clean and exhaled. "Next time," he muttered, "we take the long way around."

Hobbin chuckled, shaking ichor from his hammer. "Aye. But at least the bastard left us a good story."

The storm raged on, but the Black Siren still sailed.

They had survived.

But Ith-Kazir was still ahead.

The Black Siren limped toward the shore, her sails torn, her deck battered, but still afloat. The storm had passed, leaving behind an eerie stillness, as if the sea itself had been watching. The jungle loomed ahead, a dark mass of tangled green, the treetops swaying in the humid air.

Whisker stood at the bow, arms crossed, tail flicking. The shore was rocky, the beach giving way to dense vegetation, mist clinging to the trees like a living thing.

Hobbin leaned against the railing, spitting into the waves. “I hate jungles.”

Zili smirked. “You hate everything that isn’t a tavern.”

Gornim adjusted his axe. “Aye, well, let’s not pretend this is just another port stop. That thing in the storm wasn’t natural. And I doubt whatever’s waiting for us in there is either.”

Whisker exhaled. “We knew this wasn’t going to be easy. But we’re here now.” He turned to the crew. “Pack light. Weapons, rations, rope. We go in fast, we find the artifact, and we get out.”

Ulk stepped forward, unrolling the ancient map. “The ruins should be deeper in—past the river, near the old stone pillars.”

Gerr chuckled, spinning a dagger between his fingers. “Sounds simple enough.”

Crook croaked. “It never is.”

With that, they lowered the rowboats into the water, the crew piling in with their gear. The jungle waited, silent and patient, its shadowed depths holding secrets that had been buried for centuries.

As their boats touched the shore, Whisker stepped onto the damp sand, drawing his cutlass.

Somewhere in the distance, a low, guttural howl echoed through the trees.

They weren’t alone.

And whatever was watching them was already waiting.

The dense jungle of Ith-Kazir swallowed them whole the moment they stepped off the beach. Towering trees, their thick trunks wrapped in coiling vines, blocked most of the sunlight, leaving the forest floor shrouded in dim green twilight. The air was thick, humid, buzzing with the distant hum of unseen insects.

Whisker took the lead, his cutlass drawn, his ears twitching at every rustling branch. Behind him, the crew moved in cautious silence, their weapons ready. They had all walked into unknown dangers before, but this place felt… wrong.

Ulk studied the ancient map, his fingers tracing the faded ink. "If this thing is right, we follow the river inland, past a stone bridge, then turn east toward the ruins."

Hobbin wiped sweat from his brow. "And how far is that?"

"Maybe half a day’s march."

Zili snorted. "That’s assuming we don’t run into something trying to kill us before then."

Gornim chuckled, resting his axe on his shoulder. "I’d be disappointed if we didn’t."

As they pushed deeper, the jungle grew denser, quieter, as if the trees themselves were listening. The usual sounds of birds and insects faded, replaced by something else—a distant, rhythmic clicking.

Whisker halted, raising a fist. "Hold."

The crew froze, hands drifting to weapons.

The clicking grew louder. It wasn’t coming from one direction—it was all around them.

Gerr whispered, "What in the hells is that?"

Then the first shadow moved between the trees.

Something thin, long-limbed, and too fast to track with the eye. Another darted across a branch. Then another.

Hobbin cursed under his breath. "We’ve got company."

A guttural hiss echoed from the underbrush, followed by a voice—not human, not natural.

"Flesh-walkers… do not belong here…"

The jungle exploded into movement.

Dark figures leapt from the trees, moving on elongated limbs, their eyes gleaming like polished black stones. They carried crude, jagged weapons, their skin a patchwork of hardened plates and twisted muscle.

The jungle’s hunters had found them.

And they weren’t going to let them leave.

The jungle came alive with movement as the creatures descended. Dark shapes darted between the trees, their elongated limbs shifting unnaturally, their jagged weapons gleaming in the dim light. The clicking noise grew into a frantic chorus, echoing all around the crew like the laughter of something inhuman and hungry.

Whisker didn’t wait. He swung his cutlass up, baring his teeth. “*Stand together!*”

The first creature lunged.

Zili reacted fast, ducking low as a serrated bone spear whistled past her ear. She slashed out, her dagger tearing through sinew, but the thing barely flinched. It hissed, its obsidian-black eyes empty, and struck again.

Gornim roared, his axe flashing in the green light. He caught one of the hunters mid-leap, cleaving straight through its bony plating, sending it crashing into the underbrush, twitching.

But more were coming.

Hobbin planted his feet, raising his hammer just as one of the creatures slammed into him, its clawed fingers wrapping around his throat. He snarled, grabbing its wrist and twisting—bones cracked, and with a savage headbutt, he sent the beast staggering back.

Gerr rolled across the jungle floor, his daggers flashing like quicksilver, sinking into one of the hunters as it tried to grab Ulk from behind. The creature screeched, its strange, glassy eyes wide in shock before it collapsed into the ferns, lifeless.

Crook, climbing the lower branches, let out a sharp croak and hurled a handful of throwing knives downward, striking two of the creatures in their exposed necks. They gurgled, collapsing into the brush.

But they just kept coming.

Whisker gritted his teeth, ducking under a swinging club of sharpened bone before raking his cutlass across the thing's chest. No blood—only dark, steaming ichor. The creature shrieked, but even wounded, it didn't fall.

Ulk, panting, yanked a flask from his belt. "Fire! They *fear* fire!"

He smashed the flask against a nearby tree, and the jungle lit up in a burst of orange flame.

The creatures reeled back, their clicking turning to panicked chittering.

Whisker's ears flicked. "*That's our opening!*"

Gornim shoved a burning branch into one of the hunters' faces. The creature screamed, its plated skin sizzling, and stumbled back into the shadows.

Hobbin grabbed a torch from his pack, swinging it in wide arcs, forcing the remaining beasts to scatter into the jungle.

The fight wasn't won—but it was over.

For now.

Panting, weapons still raised, the crew stood amidst the smoldering leaves and broken bodies.

Zili wiped dark ichor from her blade. "That was too damn close."

Whisker nodded, watching the shadows. "*They weren't just attacking us. They were testing us.*"

Gerr sheathed his daggers, his usual smirk absent. "Testing for *what*?"

From deep within the jungle, a low, guttural sound rumbled.

A warning.

A challenge.

Ulk glanced at the half-burned map, the location of Ith-Kazir's ruins still marked ahead. He swallowed hard.

"We're not alone in this jungle," he muttered. "And whatever's waiting at those ruins… it already knows we're coming."

The crew exchanged uneasy glances.

Then, without another word, they pressed forward—toward the ruins, toward the unknown, toward whatever had been waiting for them all along.

The Black Siren's crew pushed forward through the jungle, leaving the smoldering remains of their battle behind. The thick canopy above swallowed most of the daylight, casting the ruins ahead into a haze of eerie green light. Vines twisted around ancient stone pillars, their carvings worn by time and swallowed by creeping moss.

Ulk wiped sweat from his brow, studying the half-burned map. "This is it. Ith-Kazir." His voice was hushed, as if speaking too loudly might wake something best left undisturbed.

The crew spread out, weapons at the ready. The ruins stretched ahead, a maze of broken archways and crumbling staircases, half-buried under centuries of jungle growth. But despite its age, the place felt alive.

Whisker crouched near a stone obelisk, running his claws over the faded carvings. The symbols were similar to those on the burnt parchment the stranger had given them back in Varondale.

Hobbin frowned, gripping his hammer. "This place is *wrong*."

Gerr ran a hand along one of the broken walls, smirking. "Everything about this job is wrong, dwarf. That's why we're getting paid."

Crook sniffed the air. "Something is… waiting."

Zili stepped ahead, eyes scanning the shadows beneath the ruined archways. "Then let's not keep it waiting."

A sudden gust of wind rushed through the ruins, stirring the vines, carrying with it a whispering sound—distant, echoing, like voices speaking from beneath the earth.

Then, the ground shifted beneath their feet.

A deep grinding noise rumbled from the heart of the ruins as one of the massive stone doors leading into the central temple began to move—on its own.

Ulk took a step back. “I don’t think we’re alone.”

The stone door groaned open, revealing a dark passageway leading underground. The air that poured out was stale, thick with dust… and something else.

Something ancient.

Something hungry.

Whisker looked at his crew, then back at the gaping entrance before them.

No turning back now.

“Let’s finish this.”

The crew descended into the darkness.

The Black Siren’s crew stepped cautiously into the yawning entrance of the temple, their boots kicking up dust that had lain undisturbed for centuries. The air was thick and stale, carrying the faint scent of damp stone and decay.

Torches flickered as they moved deeper, casting long shadows against the ancient carvings that lined the walls. The symbols were worn, some barely visible, but they spoke of something bound, something waiting beneath.

Hobbin ran a hand along the rough stone. “I hate underground places. Can’t trust walls that don’t breathe.”

Gornim grunted. “Better than the jungle. At least here, we can see where the bastards will come from.”

Ulk adjusted his goggles, studying the ancient symbols. “This isn’t just a ruin. It was sealed.” His voice was hushed, respectful. “Something was locked away here.”

Whisker’s tail flicked as he examined the deep gouges along the stone floor. “And something *else* tried to get it out.”

Ahead, the passage widened into a great chamber, its domed ceiling cracked but still standing. In the center, a massive stone altar stood covered in dust and dried remnants of old rituals.

And resting atop it, untouched by time, was the Obsidian Seal.

A single black disc, carved with the same twisted runes they had seen on the map, its edges humming faintly with trapped power.

Gerr exhaled. “There it is. Easy as that.”

Crook shook his head. “Never easy.”

The moment Whisker took a step forward, the torches flickered wildly, and a cold gust of wind rushed through the chamber, howling like a thousand voices whispering in unison.

The shadows stretched and twisted—and from the far end of the room, figures emerged.

Not cultists. Not monsters.

Something worse.

Wrapped in decayed robes, their skeletal hands clutching rusted weapons, the dead rose to defend what had been left behind. Their eyes burned with unnatural light, and their voices echoed with the words of something ancient and hateful.

“The Seal must not be taken.”

The crew drew their weapons.

The dead charged.

And the battle for Ith-Kazir began.

The dead surged forward, their rusted weapons gleaming in the dim torchlight. Hollow sockets burned with eerie green light, their skeletal hands grasping at the living intruders who dared step into their domain.

Whisker was the first to move, cutlass flashing, slicing through the brittle ribs of the nearest undead warrior. The bones cracked, but the thing did not fall. It lunged forward, a rusted blade carving a thin gash along his arm.

Hobbin raised his hammer, bellowing, “*You’re already dead! Stay that way!*” before smashing one of the guardians’ skulls to dust.

But more kept coming.

Zili twisted between two undead, her daggers flashing, severing joints, toppling one into the dust, but the other caught her arm, its grip unnaturally strong.

Gornim roared, his massive axe cleaving two in half, but as their bodies crumbled, their spirits swirled into the air, drifting toward the Obsidian Seal, whispering in a language no living man should understand.

Ulk had already pulled a vial from his belt, fumbling with a flint. “*We need fire!*” He hurled the flask against the stone floor—it shattered, flames roaring to life, swallowing several of the creatures in an unnatural green blaze.

The undead shrieked, recoiling.

Gerr, always the opportunist, danced between them, slicing tendons, dodging slow, rotting swings. “*Whisker! Get the damned seal!*”

The ratfolk captain didn’t hesitate. He sprinted for the altar, dodging swipes and thrusts, leaping over fallen bones, until his hand closed around the smooth, black surface of the Obsidian Seal.

And then—the chamber trembled.

The torches sputtered, shadows twisting unnaturally, and the air grew impossibly cold.

A deep, guttural voice filled the room, though it came from nowhere and everywhere at once.

"You… would steal from us?"

The stone beneath their feet cracked.

The walls bled darkness.

And from the depths of the temple, something ancient and unseen began to stir.

Whisker clenched his jaw, gripping the Seal tighter. "*Time to go.*"

The Obsidian Seal pulsed with an unnatural energy in Whisker's grasp, its surface cold as death, yet humming with a hunger that did not belong to this world. The moment he lifted it from the altar, the temple itself came alive.

The cracked stone beneath their feet trembled, and from the ancient carvings along the walls, black mist bled like ink spreading through water. The dead did not fall—instead, they rose again, their broken bones snapping back together, their hollow eyes burning brighter, as if the very temple refused to release them.

The voice returned, deeper this time, reverberating through the walls.

"You do not understand what you take."

Zili cursed, twisting away from a lunging skeletal warrior. "*Oh, we understand plenty! We just don't care!*"

Gornim swung his axe, cleaving through one of the risen warriors, but the thing did not stay down. The severed bones slithered together, rebuilding themselves even as the black mist poured from the cracks in the temple's foundation.

Hobbin's grip tightened on his hammer. "*We can't kill what's already dead!*"

Ulk, breathless, ripped open his satchel, frantically searching through his vials. "*This isn't a fight we can win! We need to break the connection—stop whatever is binding them here!*"

Whisker gritted his teeth, staring down at the Seal in his hands. The symbols along its surface shifted, twisting as if something inside was watching him back.

A choice.

If they kept it, they would leave here richer—but hunted.

If they destroyed it, they might survive—but at what cost?

Behind them, the walls split further, revealing something moving in the darkness—a shape that had been waiting for this moment for centuries.

Crook croaked, backing up. "*Captain. Decide. Now.*"

Whisker tightened his grip.

And then—

He made his choice.

Whisker's grip tightened around the Obsidian Seal, its unnatural cold seeping into his bones. The temple shuddered, the black mist swirling like living shadows, and the undead would not stop rising.

They had to end this.

With a snarl, Whisker lifted the Seal high and hurled it against the stone floor.

The impact cracked the surface, and for the first time, the whispers screamed—a sound not of rage, but of terror.

The temple reacted violently. The walls trembled, the black mist recoiled, and the undead staggered, their bones rattling as if something was trying to pull them back.

But then—the darkness fought back.

A single mass of shadow surged from the broken Seal, striking like a spear. It didn't aim for Whisker.

It struck Gerr.

The halfling's eyes widened in shock as the darkness speared straight through his chest, lifting him off the ground. His daggers slipped from his fingers, clattering uselessly on the stone floor.

For a moment, he didn't make a sound.

Then, slowly, he looked at Whisker, coughing up black ichor instead of blood. His smirk—the one he always wore, even in the worst fights—was gone.

"*Damn... should've cheated harder,*" he rasped.

Then the darkness dragged him into the abyss.

Gornim roared in fury, charging forward with his axe, but the black mist swallowed Gerr whole—and in the next instant, he was gone.

The temple shrieked around them, cracks spreading like veins through the ancient stone.

Hobbin grabbed Whisker's shoulder. "*We have to MOVE!*"

Whisker didn't move. He stood there, staring at the place where Gerr had been. His hands trembled, his tail flicking wildly.

Zili grabbed his arm, shaking him. "*WHISKER!*"

The reality snapped back into him.

Gerr was gone.

There was no saving him.

There was only survival.

With one final tremor, the ruins began to collapse.

The crew ran, dodging falling stone, leaping over cracks in the floor, their boots slamming against the shifting ground as they raced toward the surface.

Behind them, the Obsidian Seal crumbled into dust.

And with it, the temple of Ith-Kazir collapsed into the jungle, swallowing its horrors forever.

But at a cost.

They emerged into the humid air, gasping, bodies aching, weapons slick with dust and blood.

For a long moment, no one spoke.

Then, Hobbin slowly removed his hat, running a hand down his face.

Zili clenched her fists.

Ulk sat down on the damp ground, staring at nothing.

Crook let out a long, exhausted sigh. "*He would've wanted us to take his coin.*"

Nobody laughed.

Whisker finally looked up, his eyes harder than before.

No words.

No promises.

Just one last look at the ruins of Ith-Kazir.

Then, without another glance, he turned back toward the jungle.

The Black Siren's crew had won.

But not all of them had made it home.

The jungle was silent as the crew made their way back toward the shore. No birds, no insects, no wind—just the sound of their boots crushing damp leaves beneath them. Ith-Kazir was gone, buried beneath stone and shadow, but the weight of what they had lost still lingered.

Whisker walked at the front, his grip tight on his cutlass, though he had no intention of drawing it. His tail flicked restlessly, his ears twitching at every sound, but he wasn't listening for danger. He was listening for something that was no longer there.

Gerr.

The bastard had always been the loud one, always laughing, cheating, spinning some tale about a past victory that probably never happened. Now, the only thing that remained of him was the empty space where he should have been.

Hobbin trudged beside him, silent, the usual scowl on his face deeper than before. The dwarf hadn't said a word since they'd left the ruins.

Ulk adjusted his satchel, his eyes still hollow from exhaustion. "We did the right thing," he muttered, though he sounded like he was trying to convince himself. "Destroying the Seal… it was the only way to stop it."

Zili scoffed. "Tell that to Gerr."

No one had an answer for that.

Crook, perched on a fallen log, let out a slow croak. "I don't think he'd want us sulking. I think he'd want us drinking."

Finally, that got a small smirk from Gornim. "Aye," the orc rumbled. "And cheating at dice while doing it."

Whisker exhaled through his nose. "Then let's get back to the ship. We owe him a proper sendoff."

The crew pushed forward, their steps a little heavier, their silence stretching between them like an unspoken pact.

By nightfall, they reached the shore, their rowboats still waiting where they had left them. The Black Siren bobbed gently on the waves, her sails furled, the lanterns on her deck casting a soft glow against the dark waters.

They rowed in silence, their movements practiced but slow, exhaustion weighing down their limbs.

As they climbed aboard, Whisker took one last look toward the jungle. Ith-Kazir was behind them now, its horrors buried, its secrets lost.

But the sea never let a soul rest easy.

And the Black Siren always had another journey ahead.

For now, they had gold in their pockets, a ship beneath their feet, and a drink waiting for them below deck.

It wasn't enough.

But it would do.

For now.

The Black Siren drifted on calm waters, the moonlight casting silver streaks across the dark sea. The jungle of Ith-Kazir was far behind them, but the weight of what they had lost clung to the air like a thick fog.

The crew gathered on the main deck, a single lantern swaying from the mast, casting long shadows across their tired faces. A small wooden cask sat at the center, marked with Gerr's old dice, his daggers, and a half-drunk bottle of rum. A sailor's grave, empty but full of meaning.

Whisker stood before it, his tail flicking restlessly. His hand rested on the cutlass at his hip, but for once, he had no fight left in him.

Hobbin cleared his throat, gripping a tankard of ale. "*Bastard cheated me at dice more times than I can count.*" He took a long, slow drink. "And I'd let him do it again, if it meant he was standing here."

Gornim crossed his arms, staring at the cask. "He fought like hell. No better way to go."

Ulk adjusted his goggles, his voice quiet. "He never backed down. Even at the end."

Zili let out a long sigh. "And he still owes me five silver."

Crook croaked, tossing a handful of dice onto the deck. They clattered and settled—a winning roll. "That one's for you, Gerr."

The crew drank in somber silence, passing around the bottle of rum. The sea lapped gently at the hull, as if mourning with them.

Whisker finally stepped forward, his sharp gaze softer than usual. "We don't pray, and we don't beg. The sea takes, the sea gives. That's the way of things." He placed a single gold coin on the cask. "Wherever you are, Gerr—buy yourself a drink."

With that, they lifted the cask and let it slip into the waves.

The ocean swallowed it, carrying it into the depths, and for a moment, the wind whispered across the deck, almost like a familiar chuckle.

Then it was gone.

The Black Siren sailed on.

Their friend was gone.

But the sea still called, and the next journey waited on the horizon.

By dawn, the Black Siren was already cutting through the waves, the past behind them and the open sea ahead. The air was warm, the wind steady, and the horizon promised new fortune—but the weight of their last journey still clung to the crew like salt on their skin.

Tidecall

Whisker stood at the helm, his clawed fingers resting on the worn wood of the wheel. His ears flicked as he listened to the ship groan and settle, the sound of waves lapping against the hull, the murmur of his crew below deck.

Hobbin stomped up the stairs, rubbing his temples. "*We outta beer.*"

Whisker smirked, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. "Then we make port. Need a drink, need new supplies… and maybe we find our next job while we're at it."

Ulk adjusted his coat, studying a rolled-up map spread across a barrel. "Closest stop is Tidecall, three days south. It's a free port—no lords, no crowns, just coin and cutthroats."

Zili stretched, cracking her neck. "Sounds like our kind of place."

Crook hopped up onto a barrel, arms crossed. "You sure you want another job so soon, Captain?" His tone wasn't mocking—just curious.

Whisker watched the horizon for a long moment before speaking. "Sitting still ain't how we honor the dead."

The crew nodded in agreement.

The Black Siren turned south.

Tidecall awaited—a city of lawless trade, whispered deals, and danger lurking in every shadow.

And somewhere within it, their next adventure.

The Black Siren pulled into the docks of Tidecall, its sails billowing as the crew secured the mooring lines and prepared to set foot on land. The port was small but busy, a place where coin mattered more than laws, and where smugglers, traders, and mercenaries shared drinks like old friends.

Whisker stepped off the gangplank, adjusting his coat. "*Right, first order of business—beer.*"

Hobbin grinned. "*Now you're thinking like a proper captain.*"

They asked around the docks, and a broad-shouldered fishmonger directed them toward a brewery next to a tavern called The Crooked Gull.

"*Old man Braden runs the place,*" the fishmonger grunted. "*Best dark ale in Tidecall. Strong enough to put hair on an elf's chest.*"

The crew liked the sound of that.

The brewery smelled of roasted barley and aged oak, the air thick with the scent of fermenting hops. Large wooden casks lined the walls, and at the far end of the room, Braden, a wiry man with a long beard and a missing tooth, was filling a mug straight from the barrel.

He eyed them as they walked in. "*You lot look thirsty.*"

Whisker smirked. "*That obvious?*"

Braden poured them each a mug of his darkest ale—thick, smooth, with a hint of caramel and burnt oak.

Hobbin took a long sip, his eyes widening. "*By the gods, this is good.*"

Gornim wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "*Damn fine brew. What's the price for thirty barrels?*"

Braden raised a brow. "*That depends. You paying in silver or trouble?*"

Whisker chuckled. "*We prefer silver.*"

Braden scratched his chin. "*Hmm. Thirty barrels... that's a big order. I'll give 'em to you for 600 silver.*"

Hobbin shook his head. "*Make it 500, and we'll put in a good word at every port we visit.*"

Braden thought it over, then grinned. "*Done. But if you make it to Vellam's Cove, tell 'em Braden's brew is still the best in the isles.*"

The crew shook hands, coins exchanged, and within an hour, the barrels were loaded onto the Black Siren.

With beer secured, they moved on to food supplies, restocking on bread, dried meats, cheese, fresh fruit, and sacks of grain for the journey ahead.

As the sun set, the crew found themselves at the Crooked Gull, a warm, lantern-lit tavern filled with the sounds of laughter, dice rolling, and drunken arguments over fishing rights.

They took a corner table, mugs in hand, talking about nothing and everything.

Hobbin leaned back, patting his stomach. "*I swear, every port in this damn world has a different version of dried meat, and it all tastes like old boots.*"

Zili smirked. "*That's because it is old boots. You think they waste good meat on sailors?*"

Gornim shook his head. "*I miss a good roast. None of this hard tack and salt pork. I want a proper meal. Stew, fresh bread, maybe some stuffed peppers like they make in Rellthorn.*"

Crook flicked his webbed fingers. "*Bah, too much seasoning in Rellthorn food. Give me good fish stew, simple and clean.*"

Ulk chuckled. "*Crook, you'd eat your own leg if it smelled like fish.*"

Crook croaked. "*And I'd season it properly.*"

The table laughed, their worries pushed aside, if only for a while.

The Black Siren's crew sat in the Crooked Gull, drinking deep into the night when a commotion erupted from the docks. The tavern doors swung open, and a soaking-wet fisherman stumbled inside, eyes wide with panic.

"A ship's gone down!" he gasped, seaweed clinging to his clothes. "Crashed against the Devil's Teeth!"

The room fell silent. The Devil's Teeth—a jagged line of black rocks just off the coast—had claimed many vessels before. But that was why Tidecall had a lighthouse.

Whisker set his mug down, his sharp eyes narrowing. "What happened to the beacon?"

A grizzled sailor near the bar shook his head. "It wasn't lit."

Hobbin frowned. "And where's the keeper?"

Another voice muttered from the shadows, low and uneasy. "Gone. Just up and vanished."

The tension in the room thickened.

Old Garrek had tended the lighthouse for thirty years. He was as much a part of Tidecall as the sea itself. For him to vanish—and for the beacon to go dark—was no accident.

Zili leaned forward. "Someone killed him?"

An old woman in the corner spat. "Or something took him."

The crew exchanged glances.

Then Crook finished his ale, wiped his mouth, and sighed. "Well. Guess we're working again."

The lighthouse stood on a rocky outcrop, its tower stretching into the mist, dark and silent against the night sky. The crashing waves below sent sprays of salt into the air, and the wind carried an eerie stillness that wasn't natural.

Whisker led the way up the winding path, his cutlass ready. "Stay sharp. Something about this stinks."

When they reached the lighthouse door, it was ajar.

Ulk frowned. "Either someone forced their way in, or Garrek left in a hurry."

Gornim pushed it open, revealing a room in chaos.

The keeper's quarters were ransacked—furniture overturned, papers scattered, a lantern still flickering as if it had been knocked over in a struggle. A plate of half-eaten fish stew sat on the table, untouched.

Hobbin grunted. "Whatever happened, it wasn't long ago."

Zili picked up a scrap of parchment from the floor, her sharp eyes scanning it. "Looks like notes… ramblings, really."

She read aloud:

They come in the mist.
I hear them singing.
The sea is calling, but I must not go.

Ulk flipped through a leather-bound journal found beneath the bed. "More of the same." He turned a page, frowning. "Wait. Here's something clearer."

"They gather beneath the docks. I saw their shapes moving below the water. I heard them whispering my name. If I do not leave soon, I fear I never will."

Crook exhaled. "Well, that's not ominous."

Whisker's tail flicked. "He was scared of something. Something *down there.*"

They stood in silence as a wave crashed against the cliffs below, its roar echoing like a distant voice.

Then Zili turned to Whisker. "So… docks next?"

Whisker smirked, drawing his cutlass. "Docks next."

Whatever had taken Old Garrek, they were about to find it. And if it was something from the sea… They'd send it right back where it came from.

The Black Siren's crew moved through Tidecall's sleeping streets, the distant crash of waves against the cliffs the only sound accompanying their steps. Lanterns flickered dimly along the wooden walkways of the docks, their glow barely cutting through the rolling mist.

The smell of salt, rotting fish, and damp wood clung to the air as the crew stepped onto the creaking planks, their hands resting on their weapons.

Hobbin muttered, "I hate places like this. Too quiet."

Zili scanned the black water lapping against the piers. "Garrek said they were under the docks. If he wasn't mad, we should see something."

Gornim tested the weight of his axe, eyes sharp. "Or it'll see us first."

Whisker stepped toward the oldest section of the docks, where the piers stretched out further into the sea, the wood blackened with age. The deeper they went, the thicker the mist became, swirling unnaturally around their legs.

Then Ulk froze, his voice low. "There."

Beneath them, the dark waters rippled, though there was no wind. Something moved just beneath the surface—a shape, long and twisting, disappearing into the depths before anyone could fully see it.

Crook crouched, peering over the edge. "That was no fish."

Whisker gritted his teeth. "Then we're in the right place. Let's see what else Garrek left behind."

They searched the understructure of the docks, stepping carefully over loose planks and rusted chains. Near a pile of old fishing nets, Zili spotted something—a trapdoor, half-hidden beneath a mound of discarded rope.

She knelt, brushing the debris away. "A hatch. Leads under the docks."

Gornim gripped the iron ring on the hatch and pulled. The wood groaned, but it gave way, revealing a dark, damp passage beneath the piers.

The air that rose from below was thick, stale… and wrong.

Ulk wrinkled his nose. "Smells like salt and rot. Something's been down there a long time."

Whisker peered into the darkness. A wooden staircase led downward, disappearing into the gloom. "Only one way to find out."

With weapons ready, the crew descended into the unknown.

The deeper they went, the more the mist thickened, curling along the damp wooden beams, carrying with it the faintest echo of voices.

Not just one voice.

Many.

Whispering.

Waiting.

And somewhere ahead, beneath the very town of Tidecall, something shifted in the dark.

The stairs creaked under their boots as the Black Siren's crew descended into the dark passage beneath the docks. The air was thick with the stench of salt, rot, and something older—something wrong.

Lantern light flickered along the damp wooden beams supporting the tunnel. The waterlogged planks sweated seawater, and the deeper they went, the more the mist curled unnaturally around their feet, like it was alive.

Ulk squinted at faded symbols carved into the wood—twisting spirals and jagged lines that seemed to shift when looked at too long. "These aren't sailor's marks. This is ritual work."

Hobbin spat on the floor. "I don't like where this is going."

At the bottom of the stairs, the passage opened into a flooded chamber, where ankle-deep seawater lapped against the stone floor. At the far end stood an altar of barnacle-covered rock, and strewn across it were scraps of torn cloth, bones picked clean, and something worse—a tattered lighthouse keeper's coat.

Zili muttered, "Well, we found Garrek."

Before anyone could speak, the water stirred.

A deep, gurgling croak echoed through the chamber.

Something rose from the dark water.

First, a pair of hands, webbed and bloated like a drowned corpse, gripping the stone floor. Then a second, a third—more.

The figures pulled themselves from the black pool—men, or at least what had once been men. Their skin was pale and swollen, covered in barnacles, their bulging, fish-like eyes black and soulless. Gills flared along their necks, breathing in the damp air as they opened their mouths—revealing jagged, needle-like teeth.

The whispering stopped.

A moment of perfect silence.

Then, the Drowned Ones attacked.

The Black Siren's crew barely had time to react before the Drowned Ones lunged from the black water, webbed claws slashing, needle-like teeth gnashing.

Whisker dodged the first attack, his cutlass flashing as he carved a deep gash across the nearest creature's chest. Black ichor spilled into the seawater, but the thing didn't fall—it just gurgled and lunged again.

Gornim met one head-on, his axe cleaving through its shoulder, splintering bone and rotten flesh. The thing shrieked but didn't die, clawing at his arm with unnatural strength.

Zili twisted, driving a dagger into a bulging, fish-like eye, the creature screeching as it fell back into the water.

Hobbin swung his hammer, shattering a Drowned One's ribs, but another grabbed him from behind, dragging him toward the black depths. "*Get off me, you slimy bastard!*"

Ulk fumbled through his satchel, pulling free a small glass vial. He struck it against the stone wall, and the moment it shattered, blue flame erupted, burning the nearest creature with an unholy screech.

Crook leapt onto a pile of broken crates, throwing his weight into a flying kick that sent a Drowned One crashing into the altar.

More of them crawled from the water, their gurgling chants merging into a single, awful sound.

Whisker hacked through another, his fur damp with seawater and ichor. "*They just keep coming!*"

Then—the altar began to glow.

The symbols along its barnacle-covered surface pulsed, a sickly green light spreading outward. The air grew heavy, thick with an unnatural pressure.

Something was waking up.

Ulk's eyes widened. "*They're summoning something!*"

Whisker spat blood onto the stone floor. "*Then we kill them before they finish!*"

The crew steeled themselves, weapons ready.

The Drowned Ones surged forward.

And from the deep waters beneath the chamber, something enormous began to rise.

The Black Siren's crew braced themselves as the black waters of the chamber churned violently, waves lapping at the stone floor as something massive began to rise.

The Drowned Ones howled, their gurgling voices merging into a deep, droning chant. The altar pulsed, its green light growing brighter, casting eerie shadows against the damp walls.

Then it emerged.

A colossal shape pushed up from the depths, its form hidden beneath layers of shifting, slimy flesh, covered in seaweed, barnacles, and writhing tendrils that coiled like living serpents.

Its head was elongated, its pale, blind eyes gazing upward, as though it had not seen the surface world in centuries. Rows of jagged teeth lined a gaping, vertical maw, a deep rumbling exhale filling the air like a wave crashing onto the rocks.

Ulk stumbled back, his voice barely a whisper. "*That… is not supposed to exist.*"

Whisker growled, gripping his cutlass. "*Then let's send it back where it came from.*"

The creature roared, and the Drowned Ones attacked with renewed fury.

Gornim met them head-on, his axe cleaving through rotting flesh, sending one of the creatures crashing into the water.

Zili twisted between two of them, daggers flashing, severing a webbed hand before burying her blade deep into another's throat.

Crook leapt onto the altar, hurling knives at the pulsing runes, trying to disrupt whatever dark ritual was fueling this nightmare.

Hobbin planted his feet, gripping his hammer with both hands. A Drowned One leapt for him, claws outstretched— and he swung upward, shattering its jaw in a spray of black ichor.

Ulk tore another flask from his satchel—this one filled with bright red liquid. He hurled it straight at the monstrous thing rising from the depths.

The glass shattered against its glistening flesh— and fire erupted across its body, burning away layers of slimy skin, exposing sickly white muscle beneath.

The creature screamed, a sound so deep and unnatural it shook the entire chamber.

The altar cracked.

The runes flickered. The Drowned Ones faltered.

Whisker saw their moment. He rushed the altar, leapt onto the stone surface, and drove his cutlass straight into the pulsing center of the ritual's power.

A shockwave tore through the chamber.

The light of the runes exploded outward—and then everything collapsed.

The last thing Whisker saw was the creature's gaping maw…

Then the world went black.

The world erupted into chaos as the runebound altar shattered, sending a shockwave of force rippling through the chamber. The Black Siren's crew was thrown backward, crashing into stone walls and broken debris.

The Drowned Ones shrieked, their gurgling voices twisting into agonized wails as their bodies withered, their connection to the ritual severed. Some collapsed where they stood, their flesh sloughing off like dead fish left in the sun. Others staggered into the black waters, sinking without a fight.

And the thing from below?

It reeled, its tendril-covered mass convulsing, its pale, lidless eyes rolling in their sockets. The fire that Ulk had set upon it still burned, eating away at its slimy, barnacle-crusted hide.

Then—the cavern began to collapse.

The stone walls groaned, cracks spreading across the ceiling like jagged veins. Seawater rushed in from unseen tunnels, filling the air with the scent of brine and rot.

Whisker gasped for breath, his chest aching as he pushed himself to his feet. The altar was gone, the ritual broken, but they had only moments before the whole place became their tomb.

"*MOVE!*" he bellowed, grabbing Zili's arm and hauling her to her feet.

Hobbin staggered up, one leg bleeding, but still moving. "*Which way?!*"

Ulk scanned the collapsing ruins. "*Back the way we came—NOW!*"

Gornim, still gripping his axe, swung at a crumbling support beam, clearing the way as the crew ran for the exit.

The massive sea-beast roared, its tentacles lashing blindly, tearing through stone pillars as it began to sink back into the abyss. It was dying—but it would take the temple with it.

The crew sprinted up the flooding passageway, dodging falling debris, their boots splashing through the rising water. The mist clung to them, whispering its last, dying echoes of the ritual.

The stairs were ahead—the tunnel leading back to the docks.

Behind them, the sea-beast gave one last, terrible screech as the cavern collapsed around it, swallowing it forever beneath rock and water.

The crew burst out onto the docks, soaking wet, panting, barely standing.

Behind them, the entrance to the underdock temple caved in, sending up a spray of seawater and dust.

For a long moment, no one spoke.

Then Crook exhaled, flicking water off his hands. "*Well… that was unpleasant.*"

Hobbin wheezed. "*I need a drink.*"

Ulk adjusted his goggles. "*I need six.*"

Whisker stood there, watching as the last of the mist dissipated over the water, taking its secrets with it.

Garrek was gone.

The Drowned Ones were no more.

And whatever had lurked beneath Tidecall's waters had been sent back to the depths.

For now.

He flicked seawater from his cutlass and turned to the others. "Back to the Crooked Gull. First round's on me."

The crew cheered weakly—bruised, bloodied, but very much alive.

And for the crew, that was all that mattered.

The Black Siren's crew trudged into the Crooked Gull, soaked, battered, and still reeking of seawater and old rot. The usual tavern noise quieted as they stepped through the door, wet boots squelching against the wooden floor.

A few old sailors at the bar eyed them warily, their noses wrinkling.

Hobbin slapped a hand on the counter. "*Drinks. Now. A lot of them.*"

Bran, the barkeep, raised an eyebrow but didn't argue. He knew the look of men who had crawled out of death's jaws. He simply grabbed six bottles of dark rum, set them on the counter, and stepped back.

Whisker pulled out a handful of silver, tossing it onto the bar. "*No questions.*"

Bran nodded once. "*Wouldn't dream of it.*"

The crew grabbed their bottles and found their usual table, dropping into their chairs like sacks of stones.

Hobbin popped the cork off his bottle with his teeth, taking a long pull before slamming it down. "*I swear to the gods, I've had enough of sea-cursed horrors and sunken nightmares. Next job? We raid a merchant ship. Simple, clean, honest thievery.*"

Zili snorted, sipping her rum. "*Honest thievery. That's a new one.*"

Gornim stretched, his shoulder still aching from the fight. "*You'll get no argument from me. I miss the sound of terrified merchants throwing gold at our feet.*"

Ulk adjusted his coat, his fingers still stained with dried alchemical residue. "*No complaints here. That was too close. I'd rather be shot at than deal with things that crawl out of the deep.*"

Crook leaned back, rolling a gold coin across his knuckles. "*You think that was the end of it? These things never really die, not properly.*"

The table fell quiet.

They all knew it. The Drowned Ones, the whispering voices, the thing that had stirred beneath the water—all of it was buried, but for how long?

Whisker took a long sip of rum. "*Doesn't matter. If it comes back, we send it back under. Just like we did tonight.*"

A pause.

Then, Hobbin raised his bottle. "*To Gerr.*"

The crew lifted their drinks.

"*To Gerr.*"

They drank deep, the rum burning away the taste of salt, blood, and things best forgotten.

Tomorrow, they would set sail.

But for now? For now, they drank, they laughed, and they lived.